This is a digital copy of a book that was preserved for generations on library shelves before it was carefully scanned by Google as part of a project to make the world's books discoverable online.

It has survived long enough for the copyright to expire and the book to enter the public domain. A public domain book is one that was never subject to copyright or whose legal copyright term has expired. Whether a book is in the public domain may vary country to country. Public domain books are our gateways to the past, representing a wealth of history, culture and knowledge that's often difficult to discover.

Marks, notations and other marginalia present in the original volume will appear in this file - a reminder of this book's long journey from the publisher to a library and finally to you.

Usage guidelines

Google is proud to partner with libraries to digitize public domain materials and make them widely accessible. Public domain books belong to the public and we are merely their custodians. Nevertheless, this work is expensive, so in order to keep providing this resource, we have taken steps to prevent abuse by commercial parties, including placing technical restrictions on automated querying.

We also ask that you:

+ *Make non-commercial use of the files* We designed Google Book Search for use by individuals, and we request that you use these files for personal, non-commercial purposes.

+ *Refrain from automated querying* Do not send automated queries of any sort to Google's system: If you are conducting research on machine translation, optical character recognition or other areas where access to a large amount of text is helpful, please contact us. We encourage the use of public domain materials for these purposes and may be able to help.

+ *Maintain attribution* The Google "watermark" you see on each file is essential for informing people about this project and helping them find additional materials through Google Book Search. Please do not remove it.

+ *Keep it legal* Whatever your use, remember that you are responsible for ensuring that what you are doing is legal. Do not assume that just because we believe a book is in the public domain for users in the United States, that the work is also in the public domain for users in other countries. Whether a book is still in copyright varies from country to country, and we can't offer guidance on whether any specific use of any specific book is allowed. Please do not assume that a book's appearance in Google Book Search means it can be used in any manner anywhere in the world. Copyright infringement liability can be quite severe.

About Google Book Search

Google's mission is to organize the world's information and to make it universally accessible and useful. Google Book Search helps readers discover the world's books while helping authors and publishers reach new audiences. You can search through the full text of this book on the web at `http://books.google.com/`

NYPL RESEARCH LIBRARIES
3 3433 07574177 1

TO THE MEMORY OF
LIEUT.-COL. JOHN SHAW BILLINGS
M.D., D.C.L., LL.D.
FIRST DIRECTOR OF
THE NEW YORK PUBLIC LIBRARY
WHO BY HIS FORESIGHT ENERGY AND
ADMINISTRATIVE ABILITY
MADE EFFECTIVE
ITS FAR-REACHING INFLUENCE

"HE IS NOT DEAD WHO GIVETH LIFE TO KNOWLEDGE"

JOHN SHAW BILLINGS MEMORIAL FUND
FOUNDED BY ANNA PALMER DRAPER

FIRST SERIES.

THE

MYSTERIES

OF THE

COURT OF LONDON.

BY GEORGE W. M. REYNOLDS,

AUTHOR OF THE FIRST AND SECOND SERIES OF "THE MYSTERIES OF LONDON," "THE DAYS OF HOGARTH," "FAUST," "WAGNER, THE WEHR WOLF," "THE CORAL ISLAND," "THE BRONZE STATUE," "THE SEAMSTRESS," "JOSEPH WILMOT," "MARY PRICE," "ELLEN PERCY," "AGNES, OR BEAUTY AND PLEASURE," "KENNETH," "THE RYE HOUSE PLOT," "THE MASSACRE OF GLENCOE," &c.

WITH FIFTY-TWO ILLUSTRATIONS.

DRAWN BY HENRY ANELAY AND ENGRAVED BY E. HOOPER.

NEW EDITION.

VOL. II.

LONDON:
PUBLISHED BY JOHN DICKS, No. 313, STRAND.

1864.

PUBLIC LIBRARY

INDEX TO ENGRAVINGS.

No.		Page
53.	The Prince and the Spectral Shapes	2
54.	The Working-man's Family Turned Out	16
55.	Rose Foster before the Magistrate	18
56.	The Leap from the Window	34
57.	Lady Bellenden and her Young Friends	36
58.	The Baronet and the Royal Lady	47
59	The Burial of the Body.	55
60.	Florimel and the Black Page	57
61.	The Masquerade	77
62.	The Prince and Pauline	80
63.	Leaving the Masquerade	84
64.	The Milliner and Mr. Mobbs	9[illegible]
65.	The Pious Travellers	101
66.	PORTRAIT OF CAROLINE WALTERS.	
67.	The Milliner and Frederick Dray	123
68.	The Murder of Mobbs	123
69.	The Death of the Working-man's Wife	128
70.	The Monster-man in the Churchyard	148
71.	PORTRAIT OF MRS. FITZHERBERT.	
72.	The Buccaneers	156
73.	The Lady of Quality's Arrest	161
74.	The Explosion of the Spring-gun	176
75.	A Scene in a Lock-up House	187
76.	The Meeting in the Workhouse	190
77.	The Toilette in the Lock-up House	194
78.	Melmoth's Dream	210
79.	PORTRAIT OF THE PRINCESS CAROLINE OF BRUNSWICK.	
80.	The Introduction	216
81.	The Tipsy Bridegroom	228
82.	PORTRAIT OF LADY JERSEY.	
83.	Octavia carried Off	252
84.	The Prince and the Dancing-Girls	253
85.	The Prince and the Resuscitated	254
86.	PORTRAIT OF THE MARCHIONESS OF BELLENDEN.	
87.	The Prince and the Countess.	276
88.	The Prince and the Sleeping Maiden	287
89.	The Resuscitated and the Countess	298
90.	A Noble Lady's Vengeance	298
91.	The Baronet, the Princess, and the King	307
92.	PORTRAIT OF HANNAH LIGHTFOOT.	
93.	The Interruption of the Marriage Ceremony	322
94.	Caroline Walters and the Patrician Couple	335
95.	The Reconciliation	343
96.	A Cell in Newgate	350
97.	The Vault in the Church	357
98.	The Raising of the Corpse from Beneath the Stone	364
99.	PORTRAIT OF FERNANDA.	
100.	The Suicide at Stamford Manor	378
101.	The Milliner's Revenge	381
102.	The Milliner's Death	391
103.	The Murder in Windsor Park.	411
104.	The Last Use of the "Heir's Friend."	414

INDEX TO VOL. II.

	PAGE.
Chapter CXX. The Prince's Dream	1
,, CXXI. A Strange Adventure	5
,, CXXII. Evil Tidings	6
,, CXXIII. The Examination	10
,, CXXIV. A Magnanimous Woman	13
,, CXXV. The Working Man's Wife and Children	15
,, CXXVI. Who is the Culprit?	18
,, CXXVII. The Private Room at the Police-Office	22
,, CXXVIII. Mrs. Brace and Mr. Peter Grumley	26
,, CXXIX. Caroline Walters	27
,, CXXX. The Revisit to the Midwife's House	32
,, CXXXI. Bellenden Priory	34
,, CXXXII. The Amorous Constable	36
,, CXXXIII. A Compromise	39
,, CXXXIV. The Glass of Liqueur	40
,, CXXXV. A Night with a Murdered Man	44
,, CXXXVI. The Baronet and the Royal Maiden	47
,, CXXXVII. The Excitement and Terrors of Guilt	51
,, CXXXVIII. The Disposal of the Corpse	54
,, CXXXIX. The Two Noblemen	56
,, CXL. The Beggar's Staff again	66
,, CXLI. Rao at Earl Montgomery's Mansion	70
,, CXLII. The Masquerade—Scene the First	73
,, CXLIII. The Masquerade—Scene the Second	75
,, CXLIV. The Masquerade—Scene the Third	78
,, CXLV. The Heir-Apparent and the Sister of his Victim	80
,, CXLVI. The Hackney Coach and the Private Carriage	84
,, CXLVII. The Murderess and her Accuser	88
,, CXLVIII. The Boudoir of Love and Mystery	95
,, CXLVIII. The Pious Travellers	100
,, CXLIX. The Afflicted Maiden	107
,, CL. The Lawyer and his Mysterious Visitors	111
,, CLI. The Mendicant Family	113
,, CLII. The Milliner and the Handsome Footman	119
,, CLIII. Mobbs and his Dog again	122
,, CLIV. The Murderer and the Murderess	124
,, CLV. The Fate of the Working Man's Wife	126
,, CLVI. The Princess and her Lover	128

PAGE.

Chapter CLVII. Florimel and the Page 130
" CLVIII. Menacing Prospects 134
" CLIX. Scenes at the Beggar's Staff 138
" CLX. The Unknown Lady once more 140
CLXI. Horror 146
" CLXII. Lord Florimel and the Unknown Syren 149
" CLXIII. The Buccaneers 154
" CLXIV. A Lady of Quality in Difficulty 160
" CLXV. A Lady of Quality and her Domestics 163
" CLXVI. A Lady of Quality's Aristocratic Acquaintances 165
" CLXVII. The Monster Man 173
" CLXVIII. The Prince and the Sheriff's Officer 176
" CLXIX. The Sponging House 182
" CLXX. A Night in the Sponging House 186
" CLXXI. The Pauper Invalid 188
" CLXXII. Miss Plantagenet 193
" CLXXIII. Fresh Scenes in the Sponging House 196
" CLXXIV. Lady Jersey 202
" CLXXV. A Startling Discovery 208
" CLXXVI. The German Princess 212
" CLXXVII. The Meeting 216
" CLXXVIII. The Disguised One 219
" CLXXIX. The Marriage 223
" CLXXX. The Bridal Chamber 226
" CLXXXI. The Morning after the Bridal Night 229
" CLXXXII. The Ex-Bagman at Carlton House 234
" CLXXXIII. The Invalid Nobleman and his Unknown Nurse 239
" CLXXXIV. The Maniacs 244
" CLXXXV. Treachery 248
" CLXXXVI. An Evening at Carlton House 249
" CLXXXVII. The Conversation 258
" CLXXXVIII. The Bed-room Scene at Stamford Manor 211
" CLXXXIX. The Re-united Friends 264
" CXC. A Scene in a Dark Avenue 268
" CXCI. The Appointment 271
" CXCII. His Royal Highness and Tim Meagles 276
" CXCIII. The Secret Conclave 282
" CXCIV. The Heir-Apparent and his Agent—Slickster Sal 285
" CXCV. The Intruders 287
" CXCVI. Conclusion of the Scene at Mr. Page's Abode 291
" CXCVII. Suicide or Murder 293
" CXCVIII. The Last Meeting 295
" CXCIX. After the Murder 298
" CC. Another Interview with the King 301
" CCI. The Search after a Son.—Horror 304
" CCII. The Milliner and her Master 308
" CCIII. Rao and the Milliner 310
" CCIV. The Eaves Dropper 312
" CCV. Plans and Intrigues 315
" CCVI. The Rival 318
" CCVII. The Invalid 320
" CCVIII. A Frightful Tragedy 323
" CCIX. Mr. Rigden's Office 326
" CCX. The Chain of Evidence 334
" CCXI. The Patrician Lady and the Plebeian Girl 330

PAGE

Chapter CCXII. Alfred 339
" CCXIII. The Reconciliation 342
" CCXIV. An Explosion amongst the New Light's 346
" CCXV. An Interview in Newgate 349
" CCXVI. The Family Vault. 352
" CCXVII. Malden Farm 359
" CCXVIII. The Raising of the Stone 362
" CCXIX. A Meeting of Old Acquaintances 365
" CCXX. Revelations of the Monster-Man 368
" CCXXI. The Earl's Last Act of Reparation 375
" CCXXII. Occurrences in Newgate 378
" CCXXIII. The Death Bed 381
" CCXXIV. The Murderess 387
" CCXXV. The Earl of Montgomery's Visitors 391
" CCXXVI. The Law Suit 397
" CCXXVII. The First Ordeal 399
" CCXXVIII. The Second Ordeal 404
" CCXXIX. A Deed of Vengeance 406
" CCXXX. The Last Meeting 410
" CCXXXI. The Snake with the Lovely Skin 412
Conclusion 414

THE MYSTERIES

OF

THE COURT OF LONDON.

CHAPTER CXX.

THE PRINCE'S DREAM.

'Twas deep midnight—and his Royal Highness the heir-apparent to the British throne lay sleeping in his voluptuous couch.

Wax-candles were burning upon the toilette-table: a lamp stood near the bed;—and a fire blazed cheerfully in the grate. Mellow was the lustre thus diffused through the gorgeously-furnished apartment: the atmosphere was warm and perfumed;—and the heavy drapery of the windows suffered not the

slightest breath of the chill air without to penetrate into this chamber where Royalty slept.

The Prince was lying upon his back: his countenance was flushed—the veins on his forehead were swollen—and his slumber was uneasy. The lamplight played upon his agitated features; and as his lips were parted and his eye-lids not quite closed, the gleaming of the clenched teeth and the appearance of a portion of the whites of his eyes gave him a ghastly aspect—as if, although the body were locked in repose, the soul within was awake and enduring the pangs of hell.

Had any one stood by his couch to contemplate him *then*, the effect would have been hideous and appalling on the mind of the observer: but no eye witnessed his uneasy slumbers—none save that of God from whose vigilance no mortal can escape!

The Prince was dreaming. It appeared to him that a faint gauzy mist rose slowly but steadily round his couch, until the entire apartment was filled with a vapour which gradually became more and more dense until it assumed an opaqueness and produced a stifling sensation as if he were enveloped in a thick cloud. Then a wail stole through the midnight air upon his ears,—a wail low, plaintive, and ineffably mournful as if the spirit of some departed mother had returned to earth to sing a lullaby over the cradle of the babe whom she had left behind her. With enthralled senses and with an interest painfully acute, did the Prince feel that his eyes were fixed upon a certain spot beyond all power of withdrawal:—and there—in that spot—the cloud grew thicker and more dense, until a female shape appeared in the midst.

And now that shape passed slowly—slowly along before the Prince, upon whose forehead a cold dew broke forth; and, with feelings wrought up to horror indescribable, did he recognise in the spectral form the once glorious beauty of one of the many victims of his lust! But as he still gazed with haggard eyes, another shape stood slowly forth from the dark cloud;—and then another—and another—and another! And they each and all were the semblance of lovely girls whom he had wooed and either seduced or ravished in his time,—fair creatures who had gone down to the tomb with broken hearts and blighted affections—in shame and infamy!

But although these spectral shapes were the semblance of those perished victims, yet was their beauty glacial with the colourless hue and the marble inanimation of death;—and their forms were wrapped in the long flowing garments of the ground.

Slowly, like a funereal procession, did the phantoms move round the couch—each circuit thus shape made rendering them more dreadful to look upon and likewise adding to their numbers.

And now some appeared to have babes in their arms,—spectral babes as ghastly as the parents that clasped them to their marble bosoms,—babes which were the fruit of those pleasures that the Prince had purchased either by means of the most insidious perfidy or the most heartless violence! And those infants had all died either at their births or soon afterwards,—some sacrificed to the fatal compression adopted by their miserable mothers to conceal their shame—others murdered outright by suffocation, or even by a bloody violence, during the puerperal aberrations of those dishonoured beings who gave them birth!

Round the Prince's couch did the grim and ghastly procession go—the shapes alike of mothers and babes gradually losing their natural lineaments and becoming horrible, horrible to gaze upon! And with their stony eyes did they glare on the anguished Prince,—those eyes which lost their vital colouring and became of a dull, light, leaden blue! Yes—mothers and babes alike glared thus on the Prince: babes and mothers reproached him equally with their dead lustreless orbs.

And though no word was said, yet were these corpse-like eyes as eloquent as tongues. For they renewed in the harrowed memory of the Prince all the details of his amours with those whose phantoms now reproached him with their stony looks;—and he felt that he was a vile seducer in some instances and a cold-blooded ravisher in others! Then he was reminded that he was the father of those babes whose innocent lives had been extinguished almost as soon as the spark had gleamed;—and the tremendous truth was held up before him in all its darkest, blackest colours, that he was the man who deserved to be stigmatised as the moral murderer—if not the actual assassin!

And now a wild cry, whose agonising intonations evinced all the pangs endured by the conscience-stricken man, burst from his lips,—a cry that mental torture wrung from him in his sleep,—an expression of inward poignancy sent forth from the chaos of a soul whereon the spirit of remorse was moving!

Still he awoke not: despite of the lancinating anguish which rent his entire being, he slumbered on.

And more quickly began to circle the ghastly train of phantoms round his bed—and yet more hideous did they grow. The lamplight seemed to impart a living lustre to the wasted and faded lineaments, making death more appalling and the uprisen tenants of the grave more terrible to gaze upon!

But by degrees they lost the flowing garments that wrapped their forms—and their forms began to lose their flesh and their shapeliness therewith—until at last it was a troop of bleached and gleaming skeletons which now whirled, and whirled, and whirled around the bed of the princely sleeper!

Mothers and babes, on the skeletons went: babes and mothers, round and round the couch they glided on! With rattling bones the awful pageantry of Death swept past and fast;—and on the horror-stricken Prince did the hideous shapes now seem to glare with eyeless sockets!

Yes—past and fast went the grim array—mothers and babes—babes and mothers—all with rattling bones!

And with the giddy dance of the skeletons throng, whirled the brain of the maddened Prince: torture and horror—crucifixion and anguish—delirium and despair, all seemed to enwrap him with the pains of hell. He tossed and heaved in his couch as if the voluptuous feather-bed were a huge snake coiled under him and the downy pillows were filled with scorpions. The perspiration poured off him in torrents: the veins of his forehead were swollen as if tensely strung blue cords lay entertwined and knotted just beneath the skin. Oh! the fierce—the wearing—the rending agony of these few minutes during which the gleaming train of skeletons circled about the royal bed!

And now—rapidly as a troop of dancers glide from the stage of a theatre when their part is over—did the hideous phantasmagoria disappear, skeleton after

skeleton; and darkness—stupendous darkness—fell upon the scene.

But this darkness was only a portion of the Prince's vision: for the wax-lights, the lamp, and the fire still burnt in the apartment. Therefore was it in his dream that he was entombed in so dense and pitchy a blackness: and while he fancied that his eyes were wide open and looking as it were into this deep unfathomable gloom, vivid lightnings appeared to gleam at short intervals across the palpable darkness.

And then an awful voice—sonorous as if it were the rolling of a huge metal ball on an elastic bridge of brass, and solemn as if it came from a being whose abode was on the other side of the tomb—spoke in the following manner:—

"O Prince! has the world no warnings for thee and has hell no terrors, that thou livest in defiance alike of God and Man? From him to whom much is given, much is expected: but although earth hath no example of a being on whose head such benefits are heaped as on thine, still hast thou paid not the smallest mite into the treasury of the future. The white page allotted to thee in the book of the Recording Angel is a blank: whereas thy black page is covered with entries written in the hues of blood. A moral scourge art thou upon the earth; and already are thy crimes so great that if not another misdeed were added, still hast thou done enough to render thy name accursed until the end of time! The present generation, blinded by the dazzling rays of Royalty, beholds not all the hideous blackness of thy character: but when, in the course of a few short years, a more comprehensive liberalism shall have taught the nation to contemplate even its Kings without prejudice, thou wilt be regarded as one of the blackest monsters of iniquity that ever disgraced the human species. And then a man will arise, bold enough to tear away the glossy veil which hides the deformities of the mighty by birth and the exalted in rank; and with an iron pen will he delineate all the evil traits of thy character, and mercilessly though truthfully depict all the misdeeds of thy life. For how manifold are thy enormities—and how poor the compensation offered by any opposite qualities! Selfish egotist that thou art, if thine eyes fall upon a charming flower blooming in its virgin innocence, 'tis but to blight it with thy lustful looks: if thou beholdest the sunny smiles of maiden artlessness, the hot breath of thine unholy passion comes upon her like a pestilence, and thy kisses leave pollution upon her lips as the snail voids its slime upon the leaf of the rose! Oh! for the hearts which thou hast broken—Oh! for the fervid affections which thou hast crushed for ever! The joy of thy conquests remains impressed upon thy mind while the victim moulders in that deep silent tomb from whence there is no return. Thou triumphest in pleasures which are purchased by tears—lamentations—and premature deaths! Has some poor widow a lovely daughter whom she cherishes as a pet-lamb, the lone woman's comfort must nevertheless be torn away from her to minister to the delights of the Prince of Wales! Has some father an only child—a blooming girl reminding him of the much-loved wife whom he has lost—this fair being, the old man's prop and support, must be snatched from his arms to suit the lascivious fantasies of the Prince of Wales! Oh! that such things should be, and scarcely excite a sentiment of remorse in the breast of him who causeth that wide-spread misery! But hear me, Prince of Wales—hear me and tremble! Thou may'st pursue thine atrocious career in this life—thou may'st go through nature's garden plucking the fairest flowers, revelling in their perfume for a moment, and then tossing them aside to wither prematurely—and thou may'st continue to feast thine ears with the lamentations of ruined girls as if 'twere the most delicious music;—but, as truly as there is a God above—a God who avenges as well as rewards—a God who is just as well as merciful,—so surely shall condign punishment await thee, O Prince, in the world to come!"

Such was the terrible address which rolled sonorously upon the ears of the heir-apparent to the throne, as he lay locked in profound slumber: and then, as the unknown voice died away like departing thunder, a form blacker than the darkness appeared to stand out from the dense cloud surrounding the bed. And the Prince fancied that he was gazing steadfastly upon the appalling phenomenon, and that the sable shape expanded into colossal proportions, until it became a mighty giant of hideous mien and terrible aspect.

Then again the voice rolled on the ears of the Prince of Wales, while the portentous phantom stretched out its ebon arm with menacing gesticulation.

"As yet thou hast traced thy path amidst the roses and fairest flowers of the earth," spoke the colossal being; "and thou hast wooed and courted pleasure in every shape. All that is loveliest of female beauty—all that is most luxurious of banqueting and festivity—all that is most sumptuous and splendid, most magnificent and gorgeous, in palaces and equipages,—all, all hast thou made thine own. The four corners of the earth have been ransacked to bring together the means and materials for thy enjoyments: wert thou a deity, thy pomp and thy state could not be exceeded. The millions toil in starvation to maintain thee in luxury; and it would seem as if those millions were created only to serve thee as slaves! Thine egotism has ranged over the whole world to find food for its aliment—and it remains insatiate still! Thy whole life is pleasure—thy whole existence luxury and love. Instead of there being a morrow, and a morrow, and a morrow for thee—each having new duties and bringing with it new cares—it seems as if thine entire existence were a mere continuous dream of soft indolence and voluptuous enjoyment. Such is thy career upon earth: but what will be thy doom hereafter? Oh! hideous and appalling contrast—a contrast beyond the conjecture of even the wildest and most horrified imagining. But thou hast feasted almost to satiety upon earthly pleasures—thou hast bathed to the very hair of thine head in the world's fount of bliss! Now, then, behold the doom which awaits thee after death!"

Thus speaking, the colossal phantom encircled the Prince with his huge sable arm; and his Royal Highness shrieked piercingly in the midst of his slumber—for it seemed as if the cold and slimy contact of a tremendous snake were coming upon him. And he writhed and struggled with horrible convulsions in the imaginary grasp of the sable being: and then it appeared as if he were suddenly torn away from his couch and carried with appalling rapidity through an atmosphere as black as pitch and as dense as if it were one vast mass of soot. The numbness of an awful consternation now fell upon him; his tongue was paralyzed, so that he

could not give vent to the scream which he wished to send forth as the expression of his agony;—and through the black palpable mist was he borne along, with hurricane speed, in the arms of the colossal phantom whose touch was like that of the slimy snake.

On—on through the stupendous soot-mist did the terrible being bear the Prince, whose mind was filled with such dire horror that no mortal pen can find words to depict it—no human language afford terms to delineate its intensity. And by degrees the conviction dawned in unto the soul of *this* Prince that he was in the embrace of *another* Prince, more powerful than himself—the Prince of the Realms of Darkness! At the same time that this reflection was working its way into his mind, he became aware that the shape of the colossal being was growing every instant more and more terrible: for although the headlong journey was continued through the black darkness which was *felt* with the same sensation as if the Prince were being dragged through a pool of muddy water,—yet was he enabled to trace all the outlines of the hideous being that held him in its infernal grasp. And he saw that instead of possessing legs and feet, the lower portion of the demon's body elongated in the form of a tremendous serpent—the vast mass of moving, loathsome, undulating blackness stretching away, away, to an incalculable distance and at length being lost in the soot-like gloom. And as the fiend went rushing on with the speed of the hurricane, thousands of miles a minute, that monstrous tail rolled after him in a huge sable volume, as if the darkest thunder-cloud had gathered to form his train!

As the traveller through a night of pitchy obscurity catches a glimpse of lights glimmering in the distance and beholds them increasing in brightness and in number as he draws nearer and nearer, until he distinguishes a vast city splendidly illuminated to celebrate some grand festive occasion,—so did the Prince of Wales now begin to catch glimpses of far-off fires, which gradually developed their vastness and their lurid brilliancy to his view, as the demon hurried him on towards that appalling destination. At length it appeared to the gaze of the horrified Prince that he was approaching an illimitable tract of country all flooded with liquid flames, as the fields of the Earth are inundated with water. Pestilential odours filled his nostrils with a sulphurous smell, and his throat grew parched as if he had been swallowing ashes. A sense of consuming heat came rapidly upon him at the same time; and he knew that he was being borne headlong on towards the endless burning lake of hell!

But suddenly the demon stopped short—and his sable arms placed the Prince upon the summit of a pillar shooting up from some unfathomable depth below,—a black marble pillar on which his Royal Highness was left by the fiend to balance himself as well as he might, with the intuitive conviction that if he fell it would be to encounter destruction.

"Behold my kingdom!" exclaimed the Prince of Darkness, addressing the Prince of the Earth in that sonorous voice which now seemed to roll in undulating waves of sound throughout all space. "Upon the earth, immense is the line of demarcation which selfishness, egotism, and usurpation have traced between the high-born and the humble—the pampered few and the toiling many! But in my kingdom all are equal—and those distinctions disappear! In yon fiery lake, Kings are suffering by the side of beggars—Popes and Bishops are writhing in the same pit with thieves and vagabonds. But if there be places in my realms where tortures are more exquisitely keen than elsewhere,—if there be spots where the fire burns more intensely and serpents bite more sharply than in others,—then do I reserve those scenes of excelling anguish for the souls of men who have occupied the highest places upon the earth! And now behold the wonders and the horrors of my kingdom!"

With these words, the fiend waved his mighty arm, the sweeping effect of which was as if a strong wind suddenly agitated the sooty darkness that filled the air above the lake of fire; and it seemed to the Prince as if he tottered and shook upon the summit of the colossal pinnacle where he stood. But recovering his balance just at the moment when he was about to give vent to a piercing shriek in the terror of falling, his Royal Highness suddenly beheld a strange and fearful spectacle.

For the lake of fire had risen in a moment so high up that it appeared as if he suddenly beheld by the aid of a microscope a scene which was far distant and confused before. And that flood of flaming lava was now swarming with life—as a drop of muddy water abounds in hideous things when inspected by the magnifying power of the instrument just mentioned.

Yes—there, in that vast range of fire which stretched illimitably northward and southward, eastward and westward,—there, in the erubescent flood of living, liquid flames which glowed with a withering, stifling heat,—there, in that boundless morass of ever burning levin, writhed the millions that people Satan's Kingdom! Attired as they were when upon the earth, and retaining all their mortal lineaments, those immortal spirits of the damned tossed, heaved, and struggled with hideous convulsions amidst the tortures that enveloped them. But, oh! with what an awful shudder and with what a direful sickness at the heart, did the Prince of Wales observe that amongst the doomed myriads were thousands and thousands wearing crowns, or mitres, or coronets—the emblems of their rank on earth! Yes—and how vast was the proportion of those whose forms were decked in rich garments, and who had gold chains suspended to their necks and glistening rings upon their fingers—the evidences of the luxury in which they had revelled during their lives! And then, indeed, did the horrified Prince behold the fulfilment of the divine saying, that *it is easier for a cable to pass through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of God!*

Suddenly, while he was yet gazing upon the tremendous scene which stretched around and far away—that ocean of living fire which had no limit and which was bounded by no shore—the demon grasped him again with his sable hand which was fashioned like the claw of a vulture; and, holding him forth at arm's length over the candescent flood which glowed and roared below, he exclaimed in a loud voice—"Now shalt thou receive the reward due to thy crimes! Octavia Clarendon and all thine other victims shall be avenged! Down, down into the depths of hell—and writhe there henceforth in everlasting torments!"

As these last words rolled away from the demon's lips—sounding like awful thunderings throughout the realms of space—he relinquished his hold upon the Prince, who instantaneously fell screaming and shrieking horribly through the jet black air.

But just as it appeared to the wretched George that he was about to plunge headlong into the fiery lake, he awoke with so convulsive a start that the massive bedstead shook and quivered beneath him.

Then he lay motionless—utterly motionless—for a few minutes, striving to collect his scattered thoughts and settle his scared ideas in such a manner as to deduce from them the conviction that it was really all a dream!

But such a dream——Oh! the death-bed has known no anguish and the churchyard has seen no mental misery more poignant than the hell of excruciating feelings through which the Prince of Wales had passed in that tremendous vision. Still upon his corrugated brows stood the big drops of terror—still upon his countenance lingered the lines into which its hideous workings had convulsed it—and still was the sense of an awful consternation upon his brain and in his heart.

At length, when assured that there was nothing of reality in all that he had gone through, he raised himself in the bed—poured a quantity of brandy into a tumbler—and drank the burning alcohol at a draught. Then, closing his eyes, he endeavoured to settle himself to sleep again; and slumber was just weighing down his lids, when a strange noise at the farther end of the spacious apartment fell upon his ears.

CHAPTER CXXI.

A STRANGE ADVENTURE.

WITHOUT shifting his position in the bed—for he was so far overcome with drowsiness as to be unwilling to make any exertion—the Prince of Wales opened his eyes: but he was instantaneously recalled to complete consciousness, when he beheld the door of the secret staircase open slowly and cautiously. The idea that thieves had dared to break into Carlton House naturally flashed to his mind; and he thrust his hand towards the silken bell-cord which hung behind the curtains, when to his amazement he recognised the well-known form of the Amazon as she noiselessly glided into the room.

The first suspicion now yielded to the thought that Lady Lade, presuming upon the intimacy of a former occasion when she had disported with his Royal Highness in the bath, was intent upon some frolic; and, all idea of danger being instantaneously dissipated, the Prince raised himself in his couch and surveyed the beauteous intruder with mingled feelings of curiosity and indignation.

Closing the door as gently as she had opened it, the Amazon, who was dressed in her male attire, approached the couch; and when she saw that the Prince was awake and gazing upon her, she took off her hat—smoothed down her glossy hair—and bent upon him a smiling look fraught with a wanton sweetness that immediately disarmed him of his anger.

"Pardon me, your Royal Highness," she said, advancing close up to the bed,—"pardon me for this unwarrantable liberty—this extraordinary intrusion,—and deign to hear me while I give a brief explanation of my motive."

"Beauteous lady," exclaimed the Prince, now feeling assured that the Amazon suspected not his treachery towards Tim Meagles—although he was curious to learn what effect that individual's sudden disappearance had produced upon her, as well as the conjecture which she might have formed relative to the cause of it,—"beauteous lady, if you come to me as the representative of the Goddess of Love and Pleasure, you are truly welcome: for not only am I passionately enamoured of your charms, but I am likewise far from displeased at the sudden and unexpected presence of such agreeable company—inasmuch as I have only just awoke from a dream which troubled me not a little."

"My dear Prince," said the Amazon, seating herself on the edge of the bed, and fixing upon him a look full of voluptuous languor, "I came but to consult you *as* a friend and *concerning* a friend. If, however, you wish to receive me in another and more tender capacity, I am your Royal Highness's obedient servant now—as I was a few weeks ago in yonder bath-room."

"You are looking gloriously handsome to-night, Letitia," said the Prince; "and were I an anchorite—which, thank heaven! I am not—you would assuredly tempt me to sin."

"But do permit me to give you some little explanation of this most extraordinary intrusion," exclaimed the Amazon, disengaging herself from the embrace in which the Prince had caught her—though not without having permitted him to cull a few kisses from her moist red lips. "The fact is," she continued, reseating herself upon the bed, but a little farther off than before,—"some days have elapsed since our mutual friend Meagles disappeared most strangely and unaccountably from his lodgings."

"Well—I have missed him too," ejaculated the Prince, colouring deeply as he spoke: but as the Amazon was looking downward at the moment, he flattered himself that his confusion passed unperceived.

"At first," continued Lady Letitia, "I was not at all uneasy, because there might be a thousand reasons for his temporary absence from home. But when a couple of days passed and no tidings were received from him, I began to fancy that he must be in prison—arrested for debt, perhaps—and unwilling to let his friends know of his tribulation. I accordingly visited the Bench and the Fleet, and then made the round of every sponging-house in London——"

"With what result?" demanded the Prince, as if sharing the Amazon's anxiety on behalf of the missing individual.

"With no success whatsoever," replied the lady: "and ever since I have been racking my brain to think what possibly can have become of him. At length—but not until to-night—it struck me that your Royal Highness had probably despatched him upon some secret and important mission; and knowing that he possessed a pass-key to the secret staircase of this apartment, I hastened to his lodgings—possessed myself of it—and made bold to pay the present visit. For when once a particular idea is in my head, I cannot rest until I have acted upon it; and my suspense was too great to permit me to curb it until the morning. Besides, I thought it probable that your Royal Highness might not have yet retired to rest—in which case I hoped and trusted to be pardoned for this intrusion."

"You are pardoned, my dear Letitia," said the Prince: "your forgiveness was sealed by those kisses which you allowed me to snatch just now—and

which," he added, stretching his arms forward and again seizing her round the waist, "I mean to renew."

Thus speaking, the impassioned Prince glued his lips to her's and whisperingly spoke honied words in her ear.

"But it was not for this tender dalliance that I came," she responded, in a low and melting tone, as she once more disengaged herself gently from his arms: "it was to obtain intelligence, if possible, concerning my absent friend——"

"And you have understood by what I have already said, my dearest Letitia," answered the Prince, "that I am as ignorant and uneasy relative to Meagles as you are yourself."

"Yes—I feared as much by the observation you made just now," said the Amazon.

"Oh! let us hope that it is only some frolic on our friend's part," exclaimed the Prince,—"and that he will shortly reappear. Perhaps, my bewitching huntress, he is at this moment proving unfaithful to you——"

"Well—even that idea would be a consolation," interrupted the Amazon, appearing to take the suggestion quite seriously. "But if it should prove as your Royal Highness imagines, I can promise Master Meagles that he will be rated soundly by me. Here I have been undergoing all the imaginable and unimaginable tortures of the cruellest suspense——"

"Oh! let me kiss those lips which you pout so prettily!" exclaimed the heir-apparent, snatching her to his arms a third time. "And now my charming huntress, let me implore you to lay aside this moping mood and converse gaily with me."

"It is impossible to resist you," said the Amazon; and all in a moment her countenance became radiant, as it was wont to be. "You say that you have had an evil dream?"

"Yes—and I am dull—in low spirits—altogether queer, Letitia. And thus I am really glad you have come to chat with me awhile."

"And I also, since such is the state of the case," responded the Amazon. "But this dream of your's——Ah! you start! Well, if the subject be an unpleasant one, I will not again allude to it."

"Excellent Letitia!" murmured the Prince, pillowing his head upon her shoulder.

"There! close your eyes and sleep thus," said the Amazon; and with the hand of the arm that was thrown round his neck, she pressed down his eyelids as if in a half-playful half-soothing humour.

At the same instant, with the other hand, the Amazon took a small phial from the pocket of her breeches and poured a few drops of its dark-coloured contents into the tumbler whence the Prince had already drunk the brandy, as just now stated.

"Ah! it is sweet to repose thus," murmured the Prince.

"Sleep then," replied the Amazon. "But—— Ah! now you are all wide awake again!—and these kisses——"

"Oh, you are so handsome, dearest Letitia!"

"You say so! But——"

"But it is true!" and he clasped her in his arms.

* * * * *

An hour afterwards Lady Letitia Lade was standing by the magnificent bed.

Glancing towards the Prince, who was sleeping a profound lethargic slumber, she murmured to herself, "The cold-blooded villain! Oh! that I was compelled to play the hypocrite with him! But he imbibed the narcotic in the large dram of brandy which I gave him—and he will not awake for hours to come!"

Then a smile of triumph played on the moist coral lips of the Amazon: and she drew from beneath the Prince's pillow the golden chain to which was suspended the key of curious workmanship. Therewith opening the desk of his Royal Highness, she proceeded to ransack its contents; and in the course of a few minutes she found the paper for which she was searching.

"'Tis as I thought!" she said to herself, again speaking low and murmuringly with her liquid, musical voice. "The traitor—the false friend! But you shall be avenged, Meagles—you shall be avenged—even if I do not succeed in procuring your restoration to this country!"

Then, locking the desk and replacing the chain with the key underneath the pillow of the Prince, Lady Lade secured the papers about her person and took her departure as noiselessly as possible by the secret staircase.

When his Royal Highness awoke at a late hour in the morning, the first conviction that broke upon his mind was that he had a most distressing headache—and then the incidents of the night began to present themselves in due order to his memory. He recollected the hideous dream which had made him endure such exquisite tortures: and those painful reminiscences were followed by that of the visit of Lady Lade.

Yes—she had been with him:—but for how long? He knew not! The last incident that dwelt in his mind was a laughing proposal which she made him that each should drink a dram of brandy—and he recollected that he had as good-humouredly assented to the proposition and taken his share first, she herself pouring it out and handing it to him. Then he must have fallen into a deep sleep—for he remembered nothing more.

But she was gone—the beautiful huntress had disappeared:—and a vague suspicion of something wrong slowly sprang up in the mind of the Prince. Her mysterious visit—that conversation about Meagles—the dead sleep which had fallen upon him the moment after he had drunk the brandy—the departure of the lady before he awoke—the unpleasant sensations which he now experienced, and which struck him as being the result of a powerful narcotic,—all these circumstances appeared to link themselves together and form a chain of evidence to support the misgivings which he felt.

CHAPTER CXXII.

EVIL TIDINGS.

While the Prince was thus yielding to his gloomy reflections, Germain the French valet stole gently into the apartment and advanced on tiptoe towards the couch to ascertain whether his master was awake, then perceiving that the royal eyes were wide open

the dependant bowed and stood in an attitude which showed that he was desirous of being permitted to speak.

"Well, what is it, Germain?" demanded the Prince impatiently—for he was very far from being in the best possible humour.

"May it please your Royal Highness," said the valet, "Mrs. Brace solicits an immediate interview on the most important business. She wishes to know whether your Royal Highness will deign to visit her, or whether it is the royal command that she shall wait upon your Royal Highness."

"Then the business is decidedly urgent—eh?" exclaimed the Prince. "Well, let Mrs. Brace come to me by the secret staircase as soon as possible; and in the meantime I shall get up."

Germain bowed and retired: but having despatched the message to the milliner, he hastened back to the royal apartment to assist at the toilette of his master. The Prince, however, only dressed himself in a loose *deshabillée*; and by the time this was done, Mrs. Brace made her appearance. Germain then retired; and the heir-apparent was left alone with the milliner.

"Oh! what a terrible calamity has occurred!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, at once giving vent to the expression of that profound trouble which agitated her.

"What in the name of God is the matter?" demanded his Royal Highness, becoming seriously alarmed.

"Rose Foster—the unhappy girl——" ejaculated the milliner.

"Well—well—what of her?" cried the heir-apparent.

"She is in prison, your Royal Highness——"

"In prison!" repeated the Prince, starting from his chair as if he were suddenly galvanised.

"Yes—in prison—on a charge of murder!" added the milliner, quivering from head to foot and her luxuriant bosom heaving and sinking rapidly with the deep emotion which agitated within.

"Is it possible?—or am I dreaming?" exclaimed the Prince, pressing his hand to his brow. "The beauteous name of *Rose* associated with the horrible word *Murder!* Oh! no—no—it cannot be!"

"And yet it is as true as that I am here to tell you the sad tale, or that you are there to hear it," said Mrs. Brace, in a tone that left no possible room for any farther doubt upon the subject.

"But she is utterly incapable of such a crime!" ejaculated his Royal Highness, still greatly bewildered.

"Of *that* I am well aware," rejoined the milliner. "Nevertheless, a crushing amount of circumstantial evidence weighs against her—and it is impossible at present to say whether the matter will take a turn when the examination comes on at noon this day. At all events, it is probable that the girl may be led into revelations but too well calculated to compromise your Royal Highness and myself——"

"And yet Rose possesses a generous disposition," exclaimed the Prince.

"But she will scarcely scruple to tell the truth—*all the truth*," returned the milliner, emphatically; "to account for her becoming a homeless wanderer last night when the deed was committed——"

"Tell me the circumstances of the case," interrupted the Prince. "At present I am thoroughly in the dark concerning it. Who has been murdered?—where was the crime committed?—and how happened it that the accusation should be made against this poor girl?"

"All I know upon the subject is this," answered Mrs. Brace,—"that about an hour ago the matron of the infirmary of Clerkenwell Prison called upon me to state that a young person had been taken thither last night on a charge of murdering a certain William Bunley, the valet of the Hon. Mr. Eaton, who is the only son of Lord Marchmont. It appears that the crime took place in some unfinished buildings in the north of London; and Rose was captured while flying from the spot."

"But it is impossible that she could have been guilty?" exclaimed the Prince.

"I have already told your Royal Highness I do not believe that she is," answered Mrs. Brace. "To return, however, to what I was saying, the matron of the infirmary informed me that the young prisoner had given her name as Rose Foster and had stated that she had been for some weeks in the employment of myself, but that she had quitted me suddenly for reasons which she should explain if necessary. The matron accordingly visited me to ascertain if those statements were correct. I not only assured her that they were, but likewise expressed my firm conviction of the innocence of the girl, to whom I sent a very kind message by the matron. And now your Royal Highness will please to tell me what is to be done in this most distressing case—for if Rose should explain to the magistrate the causes which drove her forth from my house, I am totally undone."

"What, in the name of heaven, do you advise?" demanded the Prince, becoming more and more agitated every instant. "For my part, I feel as if I were looking through a fog——"

"But in the midst of it there is a pit yawning to swallow us both up!" observed Mrs. Brace, in a tone so profoundly solemn that it caused the Prince to tremble with a cold shudder from head to foot.

At this moment there was a knock at the door; and his Royal Highness exclaimed with petulant impatience, "Come in!"

Germain entered—bowed—and said, "May it please your Royal Highness, a person wishes to see Mrs. Brace immediately upon very particular business."

"Who is it?" demanded the Prince.

"A young lady who gives the name of Forrester!" was the response.

"Ah! one of my own girls!" ejaculated the milliner.

"You had better see what she wants and then come back to me," said the Prince.

Mrs. Brace accordingly retired; and the heir-apparent began to pace to and fro in an agitated manner—for the terrible intelligence he had this morning received troubled him sorely and quite threw into the background of his memory the incidents of the past night.

In a few minutes the milliner returned—or rather staggered back into the royal apartment—her eyes wild and haggard—her countenance deadly pale—and her entire form trembling convulsively.

"What in the name of God is the matter?" demanded the Prince, rushing forward and catching her in his arms.

"Great heaven! what misfortunes—what calamities!" murmured the wretched Mrs. Brace in broken

sentences, as she sank back in the chair to which the Prince bore her.

"Speak—I conjure you to speak, my dear Fanny!" exclaimed his Royal Highness. "What is the matter?—what new misadventure has occurred?"

"Another murder—another horrible murder—and one of my girls in custody upon the charge!" returned Mrs. Brace, gasping forth the words with difficulty. "Oh! ruin is coming upon me—I see it—plain and palpable ——"

"Cease—cease these lamentations," cried the Prince, speaking with feverish impatience as he recovered from the shock which the milliner's terrible revelation had caused him to experience. "Surely your brain must be wandering—your ideas are unsettled—you are labouring under a delusion ——"

"Would to God that I were!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, pressing her hands to her throbbing brows and shuddering visibly. "Rose Foster at Clerkenwell Gaol—Caroline Walters in Horsemonger Lane Prison—each accused of a diabolical murder—each able to make revelations that will bring down ruin—utter ruin upon my head——O God! it is more than I can bear!"

And the wretched woman burst into an agonised fit of weeping.

This efflux of tears consoled her somewhat—or at all events relieved her; and in a few minutes she wiped her eyes, saying, "Misfortunes never come alone—and these are black and threatening indeed!"

"But the second calamity—what is it?" demanded the Prince.

"The midwife in Fore Street—the woman whom I have often named to you—was murdered last night," said Mrs. Brace; "and one of my girls—a certain Caroline Walters—has been taken into custody on suspicion of having perpetrated the deed."

"And is that suspicion well founded, think you?" inquired his Royal Highness.

"Alas! yes," was the mournful response. "Caroline Walters is as capable of the crime imputed to *her*, as Rose Foster is incapable of the deed with which *she* is charged."

"And from what channel have you learnt this new misfortune?" asked the Prince. "Who sent Miss Forrester to you?"

"A Bow Street Officer has just been to my house," returned Mrs. Brace. "Indeed he is waiting there now, in case I should like to see him. For although the murder of the midwife was committed in Lambeth, the magistrates of which district will examine the wretched girl presently, yet this Bow Street officer has been engaged to institute the usual inquiries concerning the accused; and he is now employed in both cases. What shall I do?—would you advise me to see him?"

"I have a very great mind to see him myself," observed the Prince. "These Bow Street runners are men who will do anything for money: they can collect evidence to suit just which side they please—to make black seem white or white black——"

"Oh! if you think—my dear Prince—if you have a hope—to save Rose Foster—yes, and Caroline Walters likewise," gasped Mrs. Brace, throwing herself at the feet of his Royal Highness and seizing both his hands with nervous violence in her own,—"I implore—I beseech that you will see this man——"

"Yes—I will see him!" ejaculated the heir-apparent, forcing the milliner to rise. "But would you seek to save that Caroline Walters whom you believe guilty, as well as our poor Rose Foster whom we feel to be innocent?"

"We must save them both, Prince!" answered Mrs. Brace; "the revelations which Caroline Walters could make concerning me——"

"Enough!" ejaculated his Royal Highness, who appeared to have made up his mind to play a resolute and determined part. "Go and bring the Bow Street officer hither by the private staircase."

"In five minutes he shall be here," answered Mrs. Brace, her countenance lighting up with hope.

She then hurried away—and the Prince resumed his walk up and down the room: but this pacing to and fro was less troubled than before, inasmuch as he persuaded himself that the Bow Street officer would be enabled to avert the peculiar evils which now wore so menacing an aspect.

In a short time the door of the private staircase was opened again—and Mrs. Brace re-appeared, followed by a tall, stout, middle-aged man, shabbily dressed, and carrying a huge stick in his hand. On being thus introduced into the presence of the Prince, the officer made a bow which, though very low, was as awkward and ungainly as if it were an elephant practising an obeisance; then advancing towards his Royal Highness in obedience to a hastily-whispered intimation from the lips of Mrs. Brace, he made another bow and waited to be spoken to.

"What is your name, my good fellow?" inquired the Prince, adopting a very conciliatory tone.

"Peter Grumley, may it please your Royal Highness," answered the official, in a voice which was as rough and hoarse as if he were speaking through a cracked bassoon—for the truth was that he had been singing the best part of the night at a free-and-easy.

"Well, Mr. Peter Grumley, we shall know each other better presently," said the heir-apparent. "I believe you are an officer at Bow Street——"

"The head officer, at your Royal Highness's service," was the response, accompanied by another elephantine bow. "In fact, this here lady," he continued, jerking his thumb over his shoulder towards Mrs. Brace, "has told me as how that your Royal Highness has a mind to put a summut in my way—and I should be proud to do anythink to please your Royal Highness, let alone the recompense attending it."

"And I may depend upon your caution and secrecy respecting my interference in the business that I wish to consult you upon?" said the heir-apparent.

"I'd sooner slit my windpipe than blab a syllable," exclaimed Mr. Peter Grumley, with more emphasis than elegance. "Besides, it's my dooty to obey your Royal Highness which will some day be the suverin of these rel-ems."

And the embryo "sovereign of the realms" could not help smiling at the pronunciation of the Bow Street officer, who, thinking that he was bound to take the cue of good manners from the Prince, gave a tremendous grin as if his head were suddenly opening from ear to ear.

"But let us hasten to business," cried the heir-apparent: "for time is precious."

Mr. Grumley's mouth instantly closed—and he became all attention.

"I believe you are engaged in sifting the parti-

culars of the two dreadful murders which were committed last night?" said the Prince, interrogatively.

"Such is my wocation, may it please your Royal Highness," answered Grumley.

"And what is your opinion of each case?" demanded the Prince.

"Well, about the one what took place in the buildings up by Barnsbury Park," rejoined the officer, "I think there's some mystery as will make matters turn up different from what they now appears: for it don't seem natral that a delicate young gal of sixteen should murder a middle-aged walley with whom she doesn't appear to have had any connexion whatsomever. As for t'other case—the one over in Lambeth—I sent my man Mobbs——Please your Royal Highness," continued Grumley, interrupting himself, "Mobbs is my leftenant, as the saying is—my head muck and factotum: he's a cunning blade, is Mobbs——'tis the same wot pitched his wife out of a three-pair back and cut his child's head off some five or six year ago. May be your Royal Highness recollects the circumstance?"

"I cannot exactly say that I do," responded the Prince, with a visible shudder: but he spoke mildly, inasmuch as it was his policy just at this moment to conciliate Mr. Grumley's good opinion as much as possible. "But you were about to give me some information respecting the dreadful affair in Fore Street?"

"Yes—so I were," observed the official. "Well, I was on the pint of telling your Royal Highness that I sent my friend Mobbs over to look arter that little business there—and he's quite convinced from all he saw and heard that the gal Caroline Walters must have butchered the old 'ooman. So in the first case my opinion is that the accusation is wrongfully made—and in the second I think the charge is correct."

"Can you undertake to get Rose Foster off?" demanded the Prince, now coming direct to the point.

"I can't say—but I think I might," responded Mr. Grumley.

"And Caroline Walters—would it be impossible—utterly impossible——" said the Prince, hesitatingly.

"Nothink is impossible, may it please your Royal Highness," observed Grumley: "but there's a many things that is wery difficult, all the same."

"But you are not the man to be daunted by difficulties?" remarked the heir-apparent.

"Just the last feller in all creation to give up anythink in despair," returned the constable. "Me and Mobbs is the most desperatest chaps in England when we've got a partickler pint in view; and when the means doesn't turn up of their own accord, we makes 'em."

"I see that you are an enterprising man, Mr. Grumley," observed the Prince. "Now the truth is that as these girls who are in custody, have been in the service of Mrs. Brace; and as I take a deep interest in everything that concerns Mrs. Brace——"

"I don't want no explanations and no apologies," interrupted the officer, perceiving with his natural quickness that the Prince had special reasons of his own for the course he was pursuing. "If your Royal Highness wishes that them young gals should be got off, I'll do my best—and Mobbs shall do his best also. But it will cost summant handsome——"

"Not a word more upon that subject!" interrupted the Prince. "Mrs. Brace will give you five hundred guineas as an earnest of future generosity—and if you succeed in the matter, another sum to the like amount shall be yours."

"I'm very much obleeged to your Royal Highness—very much indeed," said Grumley, with a low bow: and he then turned to follow the milliner away from the apartment.

CHAPTER CXXIII.

THE EXAMINATION.

It was mid-day—and the Police-Office at Bow Street was crowded to excess. The intelligence that a young and beautiful girl was about to be examined on a charge of committing the foul crime of murder, had spread like wild-fire;—and although the morning papers contained not a line upon the subject—for news were not published so speedily in these times as they are at present—yet the entire metropolis had already experienced the sensation of mingled interest and horror invariably attendant upon the circulation of such a rumour. The result was that numbers of persons had been impelled by curiosity to the police-court, which was speedily filled; and an immense multitude, unable to obtain admittance, blocked up the street.

Presently a hackney-coach broke through the congregated mass and drove up to the door of the Office: then, when Rose Foster alighted in the custody of Grumley and Mobbs, instead of being saluted with the yells of execration usually poured forth on such occasions, the young girl's ears caught expressions of sympathy from every side. Nor few were the tongues which expressed a conviction that so sweet a creature could not possibly have committed the odious crime laid to her charge; and these observations enhanced that courage which now armed the poor orphan girl—the courage inspired by conscious innocence!

With modest dignity and with a winning maidenly reserve—as unaffected as every attribute of her virgin soul was guileless and artless—did Rose Foster pass from the hackney-coach along the passage leading to the Office, on entering which she instantly became the focus for the looks of all present. A momentary faintness came over her—an evanescent dizziness made her stagger back a pace or two: but recovering herself even before the rude hands of Grumley were stretched forth to sustain her, the maiden ascended with a firm step into the dock.

And now the marks of sympathy which she had already received outside were renewed within; and several persons present were moved to tears at the contemplation of that sweetly interesting young creature—so mild and innocent in looks, so touchingly beautiful, and so modest in demeanour—accused of a crime totally incompatible with her seemingly gentle nature!

Near the magistrate the Hon. Arthur Eaton was seated. A profound melancholy sate like a sombre shadow upon the countenance of the young man; and the moment that Rose Foster was conducted into the Court, he fixed upon her a long, searching, penetrating look, as if to fathom the innermost recesses of her soul. Then bewildered and baffled—not knowing how to believe her guilty, yet not daring to give his own convictions the lie by pronouncing her innocent—full of uncertainty and of grief—pained and anguished at the idea that so much turpitude was possibly concealed by an equally consummate hypocrisy—Arthur Eaton withdrew his eyes from the pale countenance on which dwelt all the serenity of conscious virtue!

In a little box or pew on the right hand of the magistrate, sate a barrister dressed in his wig and gown. He was a short, thin, pale-faced man, with hatchet features, compressed lips, and keen searching eyes which went wandering restlessly about the Court, but appeared to settle for an instant upon every countenance one after another. This was Counsellor Sharply, one of the most noted Old Bailey barristers, and whom Mr. Grumley had lost no time in engaging the instant he had received the five hundred guineas from Mrs. Brace. Not that Mr. Grumley had any particular instructions to give Counsellor Sharply in the matter: but he had told the learned gentleman to watch the case narrowly—a general hint that he was to throw as much discredit upon the prosecution as possible.

And now the proceedings commenced by the magistrate inquiring the name of the prisoner.

"Your worship," said Counsellor Sharply, rising and bowing politely to the bench, "I appear for Miss Rose Foster, the young lady who has the misfortune to stand before you."

"Her name is Rose Foster, then?" observed the magistrate, inquiringly.

"That is her name, your worship," responded the barrister: "and I may add that she has been for some weeks in the service of Mrs. Brace, the well-known and highly respectable milliner of Pall Mall. This lady—who, by the way, enjoys the patronage of all the aristocracy—has entrusted me with the de-

dence of Miss Foster: for Mrs. Bruce is well assured that there must be some fearful mistake in the charge so far as it applies to the young lady whom your worship will presently release from custody."

This address was delivered with the insinuating smile which gentlemen of the long robe so well know how to assume at times; and the magistrate nodded once or twice, as much as to say, "Well, I daresay it will be so: but we shall see."

"I should like to state, your worship," observed Mr. Grumley, in his hoarse basseon voice, "that what Counsellor Sharply says is perfectly correct. I made inquiries down in Pall Mall just now—and Mrs. Bruce assured me that a better young gal or one less likely to do wrong, never broke bread. Mrs. Bruce is a highly respectable lady, your worship, and will come for'ard if required to speak to the prisoner's character."

"Very well, Mr. Grumley," said the magistrate: "we shall see all about that presently. Now let us hear the charge."

The Hon. Arthur Eaton stood up and immediately responded to his name, which was called by the clerk. He deposed as follows:—

"It was about eight o'clock last evening that I proceeded to visit certain buildings which are in progress of construction near Barnsbury Park, on the northern outskirt of London. I was accompanied by my valet, William Dudley. The workmen had previously left—and we were alone, or fancied ourselves to be alone, on the premises. Dudley lighted a lantern, by the aid of which we inspected all that had been done to the edifice since the preceding night. There is a small court-yard in the centre, from which four passages branch off. We were walking along one of these passages, when I took the lantern from Dudley's hand and paused a moment to examine something that had struck me to be a defect in the wall. Dudley continued advancing in front; and he had just entered the court-yard, when a cry burst from his lips—and he fell down heavily. I rushed forward—and at the very same moment that I thus bounded into the yard by one passage, I caught a glimpse of a female dressed in black plunging into another passage on the opposite side. I did not pursue her because I was struck motionless by the horrible spectacle which met my eyes. William Dudley lay a corpse at my feet! For nearly a minute I must have remained spell-bound—speechless, paralysed, transfixed with dread horror. At length the very excess of anguish forced me into motion: my limbs were unlocked—my tongue became unloosened. Raising the cry of '*Murder*,' I fell upon my knees by the side of the bleeding victim—and I know not how long a period elapsed, but certainly not many minutes, ere some labourers appeared dragging in a female dressed in black. The instant that I caught sight of the mourning garments and heard her screams, I naturally concluded that she was the murderess; and I believe that I said so at the time."

"But you did not catch a glimpse of the face of the female figure whom you saw flitting away from the scene of the murder?" exclaimed Counsellor Sharply.

"No—I saw not the face then," exclaimed Eaton.

"And you cannot swear that the female figure seen in the first instance, was the prisoner at the bar?"

"That would be swearing to the effect that I know beyond all doubt that the prisoner at the bar is the murderess," replied Eaton: "whereas I should be sorry to make an averment half so positive. And I beg you to believe," he added emphatically, "that I sincerely — ardently — unfeignedly hope her innocence will transpire."

"No doubt it will," exclaimed Counsellor Sharply: though at the moment he did not precisely see how such a consummation was to be reached—for the evidence was certainly of a most damnatory nature against his client.

He then proceeded to cross-question Mr. Eaton, who frankly admitted that he knew of no possible reason which could induce the prisoner to assassinate his valet. It evidently was not for the sake of plunder; inasmuch as the murderess must have seen him (Eaton) inside the passage with the lantern in his hand, at the instant she struck the blow; and consequently she was well aware when striking it, that she must save herself by flight the moment afterwards and could not remain to rifle her victim. Mr. Eaton likewise stated that Miss Foster was a total stranger to him; nor had he ever heard her name mentioned by William Dudley, much less seen them together.

One of the labourers who had arrested Rose was then examined; and he stated the circumstances under which he and his companions had been induced to detain her.

Mr. Counsellor Sharply now elicited the important fact that whereas it was by a passage running in a *northern* direction from the court-yard that Mr. Eaton had seen the female figure disappear, it was on the *southern* side of the building that Rose Foster was flying so precipitately when she was encountered and captured by the labourers.

A surgeon who had examined the body of the deceased was now summoned; and he described the nature of the wound which had caused his death. He likewise produced the weapon with which the fatal deed was accomplished, and he declared that the blow must have been inflicted by an arm that was either endowed with great strength, or else nerved at the moment by the most malignant passions.

At this declaration all eyes were turned upon Rose Foster—and every one felt how inconsistent the black deed was with the ingenuousness stamped upon that sweet pensive countenance, and how incompatable was its violence with the grace and lightness of that rounded arm!

"Hand me the weapon, if you please, sir," said Counsellor Sharply to the surgeon.

This demand was instantaneously complied with; and the barrister observed that it was a large clasp-knife originally provided with two blades, but one of which had been broken close off at the haft. The other, which had inflicted the death-wound, was about six inches long, pointed like a dagger, and sharp as a razor.

While turning this weapon over and over in his hand, and affecting to regard it with the closest scrutiny, though in reality only gaining time to rack his imagination what question to ask next, the Counsellor suddenly observed something on the handle which induced him to ask for a towel and some water. These were speedily brought; and in the midst of a breathless silence, did he with his own hand wash away the blood that was encrusted upon the buck-horn handle of the knife. Then, having examined it with a real attention, he whispered

something to Mr. Peter Grumley, who in his turn scrutinised the knife with a vivid keenness of look; and his man Mobbs was next admitted to this consultation, the nature of which, although it took place in open court, was still confined to the three persons who were engaged in it.

Mobbs shook his head knowingly — Grumley whispered to the Counsellor—and the learned gentleman himself, drawing his gown over his shoulders with a very important air, addressed the magistrate in the following terms:—

"From something which has transpired, your worship, and which it will be inconvenient to mention at this stage of the proceedings, I have to request that the examination be postponed for about a couple of hours. It is now two o'clock; and if your worship would not object to take the case again at four——"

"I can have no objection to accede to the learned gentleman's request," observed the magistrate.

Counsellor Sharply then looked significantly at Grumley and Mobbs, both of whom disappeared immediately from the Police-Office.

"Now," exclaimed the learned gentleman, wrapping up the knife in a piece of brief-paper, "I have to request your worship to retain this weapon locked up in your desk until the renewal of the examination."

This demand was likewise acceded to; and the counsellor then wrote a few words upon a slip of paper, which he folded carefully and handed to the magistrate. This functionary read its contents with evident surprise, and for a few moments appeared uncertain how to act. Meantime Rose Foster and all the spectators were gazing upon him with the most breathless suspense and even torturing interest: for it was quite clear that some incident of vital importance had developed itself in favour of the young and beautiful accused.

"If your worship hesitates," said Counsellor Sharply, in a determined but respectful tone, "I shall make the demand not only aloud, but in a far more formal manner."

"Perhaps *this* proceeding will be the best, Mr. Sharply," observed the magistrate, glancing significantly at the paper; "and I accordingly act in compliance with your wishes."

Then, without any farther hesitation, he handed the slip to the Hon. Arthur Eaton, who appeared perfectly wonder-stricken by its contents. The colour went and came with extraordinary rapidity upon his cheeks; and when he endeavoured to speak, his tongue clave to the roof of his mouth. At length he found words to express his feelings; and, starting from his seat, he exclaimed, "I protest with indignation——"

"Silence, sir—the case is adjourned—clear the Court!" cried the magistrate.

"Clear the Court!" shouted the usher; and the half-dozen constables and runners lurking about began to bundle the spectators out of the place, so that the din thus created entirely drowned the words of Arthur Eaton, who was continuing to address the magistrate and Counsellor Sharply in an animated and excited manner.

Rose Foster was removed from the dock and conducted to a private room, where she found Mrs. Brace seated before the fire, weeping bitterly.

The young maiden started back on recognising the milliner: but remembering certain assurances which had been conveyed to her by Mr. Grumley, she advanced towards the woman through whose agency she had experienced so much persecution and misery. But Mrs. Brace caught her in her arms, and straining her vehemently to her bosom, murmured, "Pardon me, dear Rose—pardon me, for all that I have done!"

"Ah! madam, I am not vindictive," said the young girl, bursting into tears: "and if you are really sorry for everything you have made me suffer——"

"I am—I am—my God! believe that I am!" cried the milliner, shedding her crocodile torrents over the generous maiden who was confiding and unsophisticated enough, despite all her bitter experience, to put faith in the professed sincerity of the vile woman's compunction.

"Then do I pardon you, Mrs. Brace—yes, with a true Christian forgiveness," said Rose. "And I even feel bound to express my gratitude towards you for interesting yourself in my behalf this day—likewise for the assurances you sent me by the constable——"

"What did he tell you, my love?" demanded Mrs. Brace. "Let me know all he said, that I may see whether he delivered my message properly and completely."

"He told me that yourself and the Prince had paid him a very large sum of money to take my cause in hand and make my innocence transpire," said Rose; "and that yourself and his Royal Highness were well satisfied that I *am* innocent. He moreover advised me to leave everything to the barrister whom he had retained in my behalf, and besought me to spare the Prince and *you* in any statement that I might unavoidably be called upon to make in order to account for my wandering abroad last night. He added that my innocence was sure to be rendered apparent, and that on being discharged he was authorised to give me a hundred guineas on your behalf, and either recommend me to some respectable family or see me safe off by coach to any country place whither I might choose to repair. This was the sum of the communications made to me by the tall stout constable."

"And you may perceive, my dear Rose," observed Mrs. Brace, "that the Prince and myself are deeply penitent for all we have caused you to undergo You have forgiven me as a Christian—I dare not ask you to look upon me again as a friend. Nevertheless, I will act as one towards you; and please God that your innocence becomes manifest to-day——"

"Oh! is there any doubt of it?—can there be any uncertainty in the case?" exclaimed Rose, suddenly alarmed by the milliner's observation. "What means this prorogation of the hearing?—what meant all that mystery respecting the knife?—and what was the reason that Mr. Eaton became so powerfully affected at the end of the proceedings?"

"You forget, my love," answered Mrs. Brace, "that I have not been present at the examination. I have been waiting here in the cruellest suspense—and in tears, as you found me. All I know is that something important suddenly transpired in your favour, and that the renewal of the investigation promises to be characterised by the most vivid, startling, and thrilling interest."

"Alas! alas! if circumstantial evidence should prevail against me?" murmured Rose, clasping her hands convulsively at the bare idea of being consigned to that gaol which bears a name that makes even the innocent tremble—the name of Newgate!

"Do not give way to despondency, my dear child," said Mrs. Brace, in so soothing a tone and lavishing such tender caresses at the same time, that the poor orphan girl not only forgave her from her heart for the past, but felt comforted and cheered by the maternal affection displayed with so much apparent warmth towards her.

CHAPTER CXXIV.

A MAGNANIMOUS WOMAN.

WHILE the preceding incidents were occurring at the Police-Office in Bow Street, a scene which we must interrupt our narrative to describe was taking place at Carlton House.

For it was a little after twelve at noon on this memorable day, and the Prince had just achieved his morning toilette, when he was startled by a knock at the door leading to the private staircase.

Dismissing Germain, his Royal Highness hastened to answer the summons; and the Amazon entered the magnificent apartment.

"Ah! my sweet and mysterious visitress of the dark hours!" ejaculated the heir-apparent: but he stopped short suddenly—for the handsome countenance of the lady wore an expression of severity verging upon sternness, and she made an impatient gesture as much as to imply that she was in no humour for jocularity.

The Prince closed the door,—and drawing himself haughtily up to his full height, he said, "May I ask what has procured me the honour of this *second* visit from Lady Lade within a few hours, and what is the reason that she wears a gloomy aspect?"

"Has your Royal Highness nothing wherewith to reproach yourself?" demanded the Amazon, fixing her large dark eyes full upon him.

"Doubtless I am culpable of many small vices, in which, if I recollect, your ladyship has borne a share," responded the Prince, now assuming a tone of irony: "once in yonder bath-room—and last night——"

"Oh! you may affect satire to your heart's content, Prince!" exclaimed the huntress, her splendid countenance becoming crimson with indignation. "But permit me to inquire whether that latter weakness on my part to which you allude—I mean my visit to this chamber last night—engendered any misgiving in your mind?"

"In good sooth, my sweet friend," said the Prince, still maintaining an ironical tone in revenge for the proud bearing and severe looks assumed by the Amazon,—"in good sooth, I *was* inspired with some partial misgiving and vague suspicion of a sinister purpose on your side,—not, however, by the circumstance of your kind visit of love and pleasure—but by the mystery attending your disappearance."

"And the brandy which we drank together?" said the huntress, now smiling with malicious archness.

"Ah! by Jove—I remember!" exclaimed the Prince, starting uneasily. "Come, my dear Letitia," he continued, suddenly assuming a conciliatory tone and manner,—"tell me what is the meaning of this change in your aspect towards me, and now I have offended you? For that there is something wrong——"

"You are well aware," added Lady Letitia, finishing the sentence for him. "Well, it is useless to bandy words in this manner;—and therefore I will at once confess that I had a special and sinister purpose in visiting your Royal Highness during the past night—and that purpose I accomplished!"

"Yes—you became my bed-fellow——" began the Prince, unable to suppress a sneer.

"A truce to flippancy!" exclaimed the huntress. "This matter is serious—and your Royal Highness beholds before you a woman who is as strong in her resolution to work out a settled plan, as she is frail and yielding in the school of love. In a word, then, I have vowed to effect the restoration of Meagles—or at least to avenge him!"

"Ah! it is as I more than half feared," muttered the Prince, changing colour: then, fixing upon the Amazon a look full of that fiendish malignity which formed no inconsiderable element of his disposition, he said, "Beware how you wage war against *me*, Letitia—for I will crush you as if you were a worm."

"I defy you—by heaven! I defy you!" exclaimed the huntress, her eyes filling with a more than usual radiancy, her countenance becoming of the richest carnation, and her splendid bust swelling so proudly that it threatened to burst through the tightly-fitting frock which developed while it concealed those grand and voluptuous contours. "Nay—look not so black upon me—your brow may lower with storms—but your eyes shoot forth no lightnings that kill! For once you have to deal with a woman who will fight you with any weapons that you choose to name. Shall it be swords or pistols? Oh! no—no—the courage of your Royal Highness cannot be screwed up to such a pitch," said the Amazon, accenting her words with a cutting bitterness. "Shall it be treachery and intrigue? Ah! there you are more proficient and likewise more daring—because snakes creep out of sight, through the long grass, and then insidiously sting their victims!"

"By the living God! I will not endure this insulting language," exclaimed the Prince, becoming purple in the face. "Depart, woman—or I will summon my lacqueys to thrust you ignominiously forth!"

"Dare to call a single domestic hither," said the Amazon, in a calm but determined tone, "and I will horsewhip him as soundly as I will presently thrash your Royal Highness if you dare to menace me with such insolence again. For mark me—and tremble," she exclaimed with a strong emphasis: then, after a few moments' pause, during which she kept her eyes dauntlessly and defiantly fixed upon the Prince, she added, "You are in my power—completely in my power!"

The royal voluptuary trembled from head to foot with a rage to which he dared not give vent; for he saw that there was a sternness of purpose on the part of the Amazon which must be well backed by a consciousness of possessing that power which she proclaimed herself to hold in terror over him.

"Now listen to me with attention," she said; "and see whether I have been putting forth idle vapourings and empty boastings. Last night I visited your chamber with a special object in view—and to gain that object I prostituted myself to your embraces which were loathsome to me. But

it was necessary to my plan that I should send you into a deep slumber—and I became your bedfellow in order to obtain an opportunity of practising that subtlety which would induce you to drink from the glass that I had drugged beforehand."

"But this was the foulest treachery—the most damnable perfidy that woman ever practised!" exclaimed the Prince, casting looks of demoniac hatred upon the Amazon.

"Not worse than the treachery and the perfidy which your Royal Highness practised towards the man who had been so good a friend to you," returned the huntress, her coral lips thus shooting forth the sharpest arrows. "But now shall you learn the purpose which I had in view last night; and this explanation will afford the key to that mystery which places you in my power. In a word, then, Prince of Wales, I have possessed myself of your most secret, most valuable papers!"

His Royal Highness staggered back as if suddenly struck with the sharp blow of a hammer: for all the fearful truth broke upon him in an instant—and he saw that he was indeed in the power of a woman who was not likely to surrender up the surreptitiously-acquired talisman of her influence until all her objects were fully accomplished.

"Listen again," she resumed, after a short pause, —"and I will tell how I discovered that it was you through whose agency poor Meagles was sent out of the country. The other morning his landlady received a letter stating in concise terms that he had been detected in treasonable designs against the Sovereign, but that through the leniency of the paternal Government he was permitted to repair without delay to North America, on condition that he never again returned to his native land. This letter was shown to me; and I instantly saw therein the evidences of some infernal treachery. But my suspicions did not at once fall upon your Royal Highness: on the contrary, I rather fancied that it was some device of your despotic father the King, to rob you of the services of a man who was so faithful and so devoted. But when I learnt that on the very same day when Meagles disappeared, your valet Germain had been to his lodgings—had remained there for a short time—and had then taken his departure, with some frivolous excuse,—it struck me like an inspiration that there was something wrong. My suspicions were thus directed into the right channel; and on examining Meagles' writing-desk, I saw enough to convince me that some one had been there already. It was not *then* very difficult to put two and two together; and I resolved to take up my friend's cause with even a more zealous championship than if it were my own. The campaign has been opened—it commenced last night—and the advantage remains to me. By a little stratagem, a great object was achieved. The papers—those valuable, those important papers —are in my possession; and I am now here to dictate my own terms to *you*—the discomfitted, the defeated, the humiliated enemy."

"Meagles deserved all that has happened to him," said the Prince, in a thick hoarse voice and with a dogged manner: "for he stole the papers from me in the first instance—and it was by their aid that you and he overawed my father."

"We will not dispute upon the point," responded the Amazon, calmly and resolutely. "Suffice it for my purpose and for *you* to know that the papers are now in my hands. Yes—the Lightfoot certificate which proves your father to be a perjured miscreant and a cold-blooded traitor to a young, lovely, and confiding woman whose heart he doubtless broke——"

"Calumniate not your King!" exclaimed the Prince, trembling with rage.

"Then the documents proving your own marriage with Mrs. Fitzherbert," continued the Amazon, heedless of the interruption,—"a marriage which, if proclaimed to the public, would lose you the crown that you hope to wear——"

"Ah! do you dare menace me?" cried the Prince, clenching his fists and grinding his teeth.

"Then the correspondence which shows that this same Mrs. Fitzherbert—your own wife," proceeded the remorseless Amazon,—"became the paramour of the Marquis of Bellois—the mother of a child, too——"

"Fiend!—devil!—demoness!" ejaculated the heir-apparent, stamping his feet with fury and extending his arms menacingly towards the huntress.

"Rage on—rage on—I defy you!" she exclaimed; and her musical laugh rang through the chamber.

"The papers—you have them about your person —yes the plunder is concealed beneath your garments!" cried the Prince, in a hoarse thick voice and in broken sentences. "But, by the eternal God! I will tear them from you—I will rend your garments to shreds—I will murder you, sooner than let you escape me!"

And with a species of savage yell, such as a hyena sends forth when goaded into fury, he sprang towards the huntress.

But, nimble and agile as the young fawn in the forest, the lady darted aside; and at the same moment a bright dagger which she drew from the bosom of her frock-coat gleamed across the eyes of the Prince.

"Touch me—and I strike!" she exclaimed, her handsome countenance suddenly expressing an implacable sternness.

For nearly a minute his Royal Highness stood gazing upon her, uncertain how to act. His white and quivering lips denoted the fell passions of the malignant coward: for he could have found it in his heart to murder her then and there, had he not dreaded to encounter the sharp poniard which the Amazon displayed so suddenly.

"It is useless for us to quarrel thus, Letitia," he said at length: "let us come to terms."

"Yes—but I must dictate them," was the response.

"Put up your weapon, and we will look the matter calmly in the face," cried the Prince.

"Oh! I am not afraid to give you even the chance of falling upon me unawares," exclaimed the Amazon, as she returned the dagger to its sheathe in the bosom of her garment.

"Do you take me for an assassin?" demanded his Royal Highness, flinging upon her a ferocious look.

"Since you ask me the question," replied the huntress coolly, "I will candidly confess that there are no crimes of which I deem you to be incapable."

The Prince bit his lip till the blood stained his teeth. Oh! if he could only have rung the bell and given that woman into custody,—if he could only have sent her after Meagles across the seas! But no—he dared not: for the papers which she possessed contained secrets involving his honour and

his heirship to the crown! He was therefore compelled to smother his rancour—stifle his hatred—eat the words that rose to his lips—and swallow the retorts which his indignation prompted! And this was a terrible, terrible humiliation for the first gentleman in Europe to endure!

"Let us keep to the point immediately before us," he said, after a long pause. "The terms upon which you will surrender the papers—*all* the papers without reserve——"

"Those terms are easily dictated," interrupted the Amazon. "In the first place, Mr. Meagles must be restored to his country and his friends."

"I will procure an order from the Minister to that effect," said the Prince.

"I would not trust the Government a whit more than I will you," rejoined Lady Lade. "Bad Kings and Princes make bad Ministers—and such is now the case in this wretched country."

"Well—Meagles shall be restored," said his Royal Highness, again biting his lip to restrain the wrath that cost him such severe struggles to prevent it from boiling over.

"Meagles shall be restored, you say? Good! *That* is the first point. The *second*," continued the Amazon, "is that he be raised to the peerage on the day of your marriage with Caroline of Brunswick; and that a pension of five thousand a-year be settled upon him at the same time."

"Letitia, you are mad!" exclaimed the Prince, now more amazed than even angry.

"Well—if you are afraid to ask your royal father for those boons," said the huntress coolly, "I must repair to Windsor myself. It will not be the first time that I shall have demanded of his Majesty a peerage and a pension for some one on your behalf; and provided with such important documents, it is not likely that the King will refuse my prayer."

"No—no—you need not visit Windsor a second time," exclaimed the Prince. "Come—I assent to the second condition—a peerage and pension for Meagles on my wedding-day. And that is all, I hope?"

"Yes—I have nothing more to stipulate," answered the Amazon. "But I may as well inform your Royal Highness that the papers are *not* about my person—nor are they accessible to you! Well concealed are they now—and well concealed will they remain, until the fulfilment of the conditions just laid down. You may employ braves to waylay and murder me: but my death would not give you back your papers. On the contrary, they would fall into the hands of persons less scrupulous than I—and instead of reaping any advantage from the crime, your ruin would ensue. I give you this warning, because I am fully aware that the idea of sending me to an eternal sleep has flashed through your brain more than once during the last quarter of an hour. You will therefore now do so at your peril."

Thus speaking, the Amazon turned away and moved towards the private door—while his Royal Highness, astounded at the fact of her having read his thoughts so easily, remained transfixed and petrified with horror and amazement.

"By the by," she said, stopping short and looking over her shoulder, "there must be a period fixed for the fulfilment of the conditions just settled between us. The matter can't go on for everlasting, you know. I suppose that poor Meagles has been hurried off to America in a ship-of-war? The people of England have to support navies in order that they may become instruments of oppression against themselves! God's curse will light upon such a *paternal Government!*" she added bitterly. "But that is not the point. We were talking of Meagles—and you will do well to have a fast-sailing vessel sent after him: for I accord six weeks, and no more, for the fulfilment of our terms. If that interval elapses without seeing Meagles return, then will I publish the papers. Farewell!"

And having thus spoken, the magnanimous huntress quitted the royal apartment—leaving the Prince of Wales more humiliated, more disgusted with himself and all the world, and more disposed to abandon himself to despair than ever he had been before. Indeed, to tell the full truth, he was just in that humour when for a cup of the waters of oblivion he would have sold his soul to Satan!

CHAPTER CXXV.

THE WORKING MAN'S WIFE AND CHILDREN.

And now we have another scene to relate, which occurred contemporaneously with those described in the two preceding chapters, and to which we must direct attention ere we can return to the Police-Office and resume the adventures of Rose Foster.

For while she was standing in the dock soon after twelve on this memorable day,—and while the Amazon was exhibiting the magnanimous heroism of her character to the Prince of Wales,—a sad and pitiable spectacle might have been seen in that garret where the wife and children of Melmoth the Working Man were huddling together.

But the working man himself was not there! The letter which he had written, and which was in the same style as that penned by Meagles, had been duly received by the unhappy woman, to whose heart it had appeared to carry the blight of death! For now did she feel herself widowed—now did she look upon her children as fatherless;—and, in addition to this appalling misery, was the crushing idea that *he*—the man whom she loved so fondly,—*he*, the husband of herself and the father of her children,—that *he* was plunged into the bitterest, deepest despair!

Oh! as that poor woman pressed her babe to her breast and cast round her eyes upon the other three children who sat near her looking up into her worn countenance as if seeking for consolation there, but finding all a hopeless blank or else the sombre gloom of despair,—as she thus threw her hot and tearless eyes around and at a glance embraced the unfortunate beings who were left dependent solely upon her,—it seemed as if her heart-strings would snap suddenly and she must sink down beneath the intolerable load of her misfortune.

A husband torn away from a sickly, dying wife!—a father from four children the eldest of whom was a mere boy and the youngest a babe at the breast! Oh! it was too much to be borne,—too much even for a strong woman to endure—and therefore enough to crush altogether that poor ailing creature who had already seen so much misery.

The reader will remember that Melmoth had robbed Meagles one night and that Meagles had subsequently bade him keep the gold, which was indeed at the time intended to relieve him. Comforts

had then been introduced to the garret; but the working-man would not remove into a better lodging for fear of absorbing his little store ere he should succeed in obtaining employment. Then it happened that he had about his person all his treasure at the moment when he became involved in the adventure which hurried him with such rapidity through the mock-trial at the Home Office—the journey to Woolwich—and the embarkation in the boat whence he plunged so desperately into the Thames on the night of pitchy darkness. But we must observe that when he had penned his brief and formal note, as dictated to him by the hirelings of despotic authorities, he had entrusted his gold together with that letter to the peace-officer who undertook to deliver both next morning in London: but the villanous messenger left the note at the proper address, and retained the money for himself. Yes—all—every farthing did the officer keep: not the smallest mite did he spare for the woman who was made as it were a widow and the children who were in like manner rendered fatherless!

And thus the few comforts which had been gathered in that garret—and the vesture which had been redeemed from pledge—all found their way back to the pawnbroker's to furnish the means of procuring bread. Woeful fate!—heart-rending and agonising was it for that poor mother to see article after article disappear, swallowed up by the ravenous maw of the monster Pauperism! And as she day by day saw the garret coming back to its recent state of misery—and her children lapsing into the shivering, shuddering chill of semi-nudity—and the landlady's looks waxing blacker and more suspicious as the weekly rent-day was approaching,—the poor creature felt that she could have lain herself down to die, had it not been necessary to live on as well and as long as she could for the sake of her children!

And now the morning had arrived when the pittance was to be paid for the garret—and it was the same day as that on which the incidents of the preceding chapters took place.

Scarcely had noon been proclaimed by all the clocks of the metropolis,—those faithful servitors of Old Time with their iron tongues,—when the sharp, ominous, expected tap at the door was heard; and Mrs. Thomas, the vixenish landlady, entered the garret.

"Well, Mrs. Melmoth, how be you to-day?" asked the woman, affecting a civil tone although she more than half suspected that she should have to change it in a minute: for the distress of the poor family was no secret to her—her lynx eyes having marked every article that was taken out by the eldest boy to pledge.

"Mrs. Thomas, I am very ill—and nearly driven to despair with misery and anguish," replied the poor woman; "and what is worse," she added, bursting into tears, "I am even unable to pay you the trifle——"

"I knowed it!" ejaculated the landlady, smacking her hand against the wall as a substitute for the table which she would have struck if there had been one there. "I am robbed as completely as if I was stopped on the highway."

"Robbed! Oh! no—no," moaned Mrs. Melmoth. "Though poor—aye, destitute—we are honest——"

"There ain't no such a thing as honesty amongst poor folks!" shrieked the landlady. "I tell you I've been robbed with my eyes hopen—and I'll prove it! Hasn't the things which should have been left for me to put the brokers in upon—hasn't they been removed under my very nose——"

"They have—they have indeed," sobbed Mrs. Melmoth, pressing her babe to her bosom and endeavouring to calm the other children who began to cry: "but everything has been made away with to procure bread——"

"The rent should be paid first," ejaculated Mrs. Thomas. "Now what am I to tell my landlord when he comes and asks for *his* money—which he will do this evening—and I'm just the half-crown short——"

"Surely, my dear Mrs. Thomas," interrupted the working man's wife, "you can trust me for a few days—till something turns up——"

"Nothink won't turn up," cried the heartless vixen. "The Government is a persecuting you and your'n—and they'll hunt ye down to the dogs. But the chase shan't take place in my house, I can tell you. Besides, the tax-gatherer has already been and asked me why I keep such seditious, vickedly-disposed people beneath my roof——"

"You do not mean to turn us out?" exclaimed Mrs. Melmoth, casting a look of mingled terror and anguish upon the landlady.

"Yes, but I do though!" was the withering, blighting response. "So tramp—be off——"

"Mercy—mercy!" screamed the poor mother: "if not for me, at least for this innocent babe—and those unfortunate children——My God! mercy—mercy——"

"No—tramp—be off—out with ye!" vociferated Mrs. Thomas, working herself up into a perfect fury. "Bundle—or I'll call in a constable——"

"Come, then, my poor children—courage!" murmured Mrs. Melmoth, in a stifling voice—for she felt as if her heart must break. "Come—let us go forth into the street—and—and——beg!"

As she uttered these last words, the poor woman staggered against the door-post and almost dropped the babe from her arms: for although she had often and often thought that to beggary her doom must lead—and although for weeks and months past, her waking reveries by day and her dreams by night had depicted herself and all her children drawn up in a ghastly, ghost-like line in the public streets stretching forth the hand of mendicity,—yet had she never dared breathe *aloud* the awful word itself until the present occasion. But now the appalling moment had arrived—the consummation of the calamity stared her in the face—she was already standing upon the threshold of that doom which she had so long foreseen and which now made her blood stagnate as if chilled in her veins.

And forth went the unhappy family—the inhuman landlady overwhelming them with reproaches, because they were poor!

Oh! poverty is indeed a crime in this land of civilisation and of Bible Societies,—in this country where religion is made so much of that there is a law to punish with the treadmill those who do not go to church,—in this kingdom where a young lady at present reigns "by the grace of God!"

But it was in the time of that diabolical old monster George III—the mad, scrofulous, and cold-bloodedly cruel grandfather of this same young lady to whom we have just alluded,—it was in the time of that atrocious tyrant whom despicably sycophantic

historians have covered with fulsome praises, but who was a scandal and a shame to human nature as well as a scourge and a curse to the human race,—it was in his time, we say, that the working man's family turned out from their garret-home into the inclemency and houseless desolation of the open streets!

And now the oft foreshadowed doom was come at last—the long foreseen consummation was present—and the heart-broken mother of the crying, starving, shivering children found herself fated to teach them how to beg!

In Whitehall did they take their stand on this afternoon of their initiative in the arts and devices of mendicancy. But an initiative *only* was it indeed: for nature—pure, unadulterated nature—traced that profound and ineffable sorrow upon the countenance of the mother, and gave that woe-begone aspect to the children. Art was not needed there: no—O God!—no—the scene was all too true and all too natural!

Yes—in the great thoroughfare of Whitehall did Mrs. Melmoth take her stand, with the babe in her arms—the eldest boy and the girl on her right hand, and the youngest boy on her left. There—in that thoroughfare, where a King had once been so righteously put to death for making war on his people—that same King who is now falsely called a Martyr,—there was it that the working man's wife and children placed themselves to supplicate alms of the passers-by!

O Working Men of England! how many thousands—how many hundreds of thousands of ye have had your families go down into the streets to beg? Rise early—toil hard all day—eat of the scantiest and drink of the poorest the while—go to-bed late—rise early again—pass through the same wretched routine of crushing labour and semi-starvation day after day,—and what is the result? Ye cannot keep yourselves and your families from misery and wretchedness. No—destitution and then beggary or the

workhouse come at last,—and your end is either death on a dunghill, or death in an Union with the blessed certainty of a common deal coffin and a pauper's grave,—while your children are left upon the world to go through all that you have suffered —meet the same experiences—pass through the same miseries, privations, woes, and heart-breaking afflictions—and perish in the same way at last! Yes —Working Men of England! this is your doom—this is your fate! Ye who make silken textures for the indolent wealthy, are shivering in rags yourselves: ye who raise all the choicest fruits of the earth for the pampered, insolent, overbearing aristocrat, are starving yourselves!

By the living God! all this is intolerable! It is enough to make ye atheists—infidels—unbelievers; —and it assuredly is far more than sufficient to make ye Chartists, Republicans, and Communists! The appalling misery and the monstrous oppression which exist in this country try your faith in God's mercy to the very uttermost;—and if any one were to preach the doctrine that the world was naught save a huge pitiless machine, uncared for by the Almighty but abandoned to the caprices and iniquities of Satan, ye would not be blamed if, yielding to the influence of your own bitter experience, ye believed therein!

But, no!—the Working Men of England require not sophistry—much less metaphysics to account for the evils which they endure. The causes are too palpable—too glaring—too apparent;—and those causes we ourselves have proclaimed and denounced a thousand times—and shall continue to proclaim and denounce so long as there remains the smallest particle of misery in these realms! For the causes thus alluded to exist in our vitiated institutions,—and chiefly our aristocracy, with its hereditary titles and its law of primogeniture—its usurpation of all the governmental and administrative powers of the State—its heartless tyranny and its cold-blooded avarice—its voluptuousness and luxury, maintained at the expense of starving millions and wide-spread injustice—its diabolical despotism and its insatiable rapacity!

But we had almost forgotten that poor family whom we have just seen turned out into the streets —turned out to beg, or starve!

Carriages—splendid equipages—rolled by; and the poor woman said to herself in the blackness of her despair, "What have the children of that lady done that they should ride in so fine a coach, while mine are shivering and starving here!"

"Mother," whispered the eldest boy—and he pointed to his little sister, who had sunk down exhausted upon the cold pavement.

"O God! that we were all dead—that we were all dead!" murmured Mrs. Melmoth, in a low tone, but with a concentrated bitterness such as she had never experienced nor displayed before: and, giving the babe to the eldest boy, she took up the little girl—pressed the poor child to her bosom—and covered her wan, thin face with kisses.

Oh! that was indeed a scene of misery—misery —misery! And here must we leave for the present the unfortunate woman with her starving children, —yes—leave them there—in the open street—houseless, penniless, foodless—as so many, many thousands of the British Working Men's families are at all times houseless, penniless, foodless!

CHAPTER CXXVI.

WHO IS THE CULPRIT?

PUNCTUALLY at four o'clock on this day of many and startling incidents, the case of Rose Foster was called on again at the Police-Office in Bow Street; and the young girl once more entered the dock with a firm step. Her countenance was composed, though very pale: but a slight tint of the rose appeared softly on that colourless purity of the lily, as she received an encouraging look from Counsellor Sharply as he entered the little box or pew on the right hand side of the magistrate. For in that rapid and only just perceptible glance, the orphan read a certain satisfaction on the part of the barrister which convinced her that *he* entertained a good opinion of her case; and thus to a soul already fortified by conscious innocence was the anodyne of hope imparted—that hope which resembles the dew that falls so gently, so silently, and yet so refreshingly upon the withering, half-blighted flower!

The look which Rose threw timidly round the court, showed her that it was as densely crowded as in the earlier part of the day: but two circumstances instantaneously struck her as significant,—for in such a situation the veriest trifle assumes an importance which on ordinary occasions would be totally overlooked. The first was that Arthur Eaton no longer enjoyed the distinction of occupying a seat near the magistrate, but was placed in the body of the court, between the dock and the bench;—and the other circumstance above alluded to was that neither Mr. Peter Gramley nor his factotum Mobbs were present.

"What course are you now about to pursue, Mr. Sharply?" inquired the magistrate, by way of re-opening the proceedings.

"I purpose to begin by asking the Hon. Mr. Eaton a few questions," said the learned gentleman, rising from his seat and drawing his gown over his shoulders.

"Do you wish me to enter the witness-box, sir?" demanded Arthur, whose manner was marked by a peculiarity which failed not to strike every one present: for there was a restless glitter in his eyes accompanied by a nervous quivering of the lips and an agitation of the entire being, which, coupled with the mysterious turn that the proceedings had appeared to take at the first examination, began to excite strange and startling suspicions in the minds of the spectators.

"No, sir—I do *not* wish you to enter *this* box," said Counsellor Sharply, with that significancy, or rather semi-sarcasm and covert irony in which barristers are so prone to indulge: "you can remain where you are—*at least for the present*," added the learned gentleman, with a deeper meaning, as he glanced encouragingly at Rose Foster.

But it was almost with a feeling of alarm that the young girl caught this look and comprehended its purport: for, when considered in connexion with the mysterious observations in which the Counsellor had been indulging, it appeared as if he meant to intimate the probability that Mr. Eaton would speedily change places with herself. And Rose was alarmed, because although she was deeply, deeply anxious that her own innocence should transpire, she

was shocked at the thought that he who had appeared as the principal witness against her could possibly be himself the perpetrator of the crime. A film came over her eyes—a dizziness passed through her brain—and a sickness seized upon her heart: for her generous nature experienced the same boundless compassion for Arthur Eaton which he himself had all along felt for her;—and moreover, her confidence in human nature was suddenly prostrated by the idea that a young man with so ingenuous a countenance, a brow whereon such noble thoughts seemed impressed, and eyes wherein all lofty emotions might be read,—her soul sank cowering down, we say, with alarm and anguish at the thought that the being created after the image of God was capable of such tremendous hypocrisy!

But this sensation of physical and mental faintness was as evanescent as it was profound: and all the young girl's ideas fell back again into their proper channels and she was recalled completely to herself, when Counsellor Sharply began to question the Hon. Arthur Eaton.

"It appeared, sir, by your statement of this morning," said the learned gentleman, "that from the court-yard of the building where the tragedy took place, four passages branch off; and you beheld *your* female figure dressed in black rush up the passage leading due north. Was it not so?"

"It was so," answered Mr. Eaton, in a tone which appeared alike gloomy and impatient.

"And you heard another witness declare it was on the southern side of the buildings that the prisoner was stopped by himself and others?" said Mr. Sharply, with an interrogative accentuation.

"I heard that point established in evidence," responded Eaton; "and I once more proclaim that I shall be delighted to see the innocence of the young lady in the dock fully established."

"Perhaps you will be gratified, sir," remarked the Counsellor, drily and laconically. "Now, sir," he continued, "will you be so kind as to state whether you were always on good terms with your valet, William Dudley——"

"If there be any harm that I might say of the dead," exclaimed Arthur Eaton indignantly, "I would sooner die myself than reveal it!"

This answer produced a breathless amazement throughout the court—astonishing even Counsellor Sharply himself, who in truth had merely put one of those hap-hazard and random questions which barristers so frequently ask, and to which they are far from anticipating any important result.

"Then there *is* harm which you know and can proclaim in reference to the deceased William Dudley?" said the learned gentleman, fixing his keen searching eyes upon the young gentleman, who was evidently much pained and agitated by the sudden turn which the proceedings were taking. "Come, sir—let us have a frank, honest, and straight-forward answer, if you please," added Mr. Sharply, who was now looking so uncommonly knowing that all the spectators really fancied he had purposely entered upon this particular line of examination, instead of having fallen into it by one of those mere hazards which so often bring the most unexpected fish to the legal net which forensic artifice throws out.

"Your worship, I appeal to you——" began Arthur Eaton, his agitation increasing every moment.

"Sir, you must answer the learned gentleman's questions," responded the magistrate, with a curtness evincing the unfavourable impression already made upon his mind in respect to Eaton.

"Then I at once and emphatically decline to explain any of the antecedents connected with the murdered Dudley," said the young gentleman, suddenly recovering a composure and a firmness which might have arisen from a consummate hardihood as well as from those generous feelings which in reality prompted his conduct: but inasmuch as the true motives which swayed him at the time were totally unknown and of course unsuspected in that court, every one present looked upon him as displaying that dogged defiance and bold-fronted obstinacy with which the perpetrators of enormous crimes so frequently endeavour to arm themselves.

"Remember, Mr. Eaton," said the magistrate, leaning over his desk and speaking in a low but earnest tone to the young gentleman,—"remember, Mr. Eaton, the equivocal position in which you stand; and take notice that the fullest and most satisfactory explanation is required at the hands of every one situated as you now are."

"Let Mr. Sharply detail the grounds of those suspicions which he has dared to allege as existing against me," exclaimed Mr. Eaton, in a loud tone and with an air of superb indignation,—"and I shall know how to answer him."

"But he has a right to question you, Mr. Eaton, on preliminary matters," observed the magistrate.

"Then, in reference to William Dudley," said the young gentleman, after a few moments' profound reflection, "I will state this much,—that some short time ago I had reason—much reason—to be dissatisfied with him: but I pardoned him—and the influence of that forgiveness on my part produced the most salutary results. In a word, William Dudley became a man whom I would have trusted with untold gold;—and the proof of my excellent opinion of him may be found in the fact that I had purposed and promised to place him at the head of the institution for which the building where he met his death is intended."

"I must now question you upon another point, Mr. Eaton," said Counsellor Sharply, who was beginning to wonder why Grumley and Mobbs did not make their appearance. "You have already admitted, in your examination of this morning, that Miss Foster was, so far as you are aware, totally unknown to William Dudley and that you cannot conceive any possible motive which she could have for the crime *at present* imputed to her? Now, will you please to inform me whether the deceased was connected, in any shape or way, with any woman who might have a motive in causing his death? Any love affair—any vengeance that might seek its bloody gratification——"

"Ah! it is possible!" murmured Arthur Eaton, a ray of light darting in unto his soul with the vividness of the electric fluid flashing through a dark chamber: and, pressing his hand to his brow, he remained standing thus for nearly a minute, absorbed in the deepest—most painful thought.

For all on a sudden had the suspicion sprung up in his mind that Fernanda—the vindictive, unsparing, merciless Fernanda—might have done the atrocious deed. Hitherto circumstantial evidence had so completely pointed towards Rose Foster, that the young gentleman was compelled, as we have already

said, to yield to his convictions, against his inclinations, and believe *her* guilty. And although the web of testimony surrounding Rose had appeared to spread out and enmesh himself,—yet, knowing himself to be innocent, he naturally concluded that the net, despite of all Counsellor Sharply's artful pullings and astute twistings, would close in again upon her whom he painfully and sorrowfully regarded as the true culprit. But now, that second random question thrown out by the barrister,—that query which suggested the possibility of *another woman* having committed the foul deed,—produced a sudden and most exciting revulsion in the ideas of the Hon. Arthur Eaton; and he was led to reflect, all in a moment, that it was indeed possible—nay, even probable that Rose was innocent and that some other female was the assassin. But that *other* female—who could she be? The answer was readily suggested by a crowd of past circumstances to the young gentleman's imagination; and he saw in a moment that if Rose were not really the murderess, *then* Fernanda must be!

Quick as a flight of birds sweeps through the ambient air, did this train of reflections traverse the mind of Arthur Eaton; and therefore was it that he pressed his hand to his throbbing brows—therefore was it that for nearly a minute he remained absorbed in profound and painful thought.

"You heard my last question, sir," observed Mr. Counsellor Sharply, who soon grew impatient: "may I request an answer to it? Or shall I repeat it for your behoof? It was whether the deceased William Dudley was known to be connected with any woman in whose breast he might have inspired feelings of a nature calculated to prompt her to the commission of this black crime?"

Eaton was about to reveal everything, when it struck him that were he to tear away the veil which covered the past he would be devoting the name of Dudley to infamy and execration, and he would likewise be denouncing Fernanda to the whole world for crimes which he had forgiven, merely because he now suspected her of a new iniquity of which she might prove to be totally guiltless. And if thus denounced, she would be arrested at once—and he must appear against her—and, condemned as a prisoner, she would inevitably perish on the scaffold. Thus even if she should be proved innocent in respect to Dudley's death, the revelation of the reasons which led him to suspect her of that crime would send her all the same to the gibbet;—and this was what Eaton would not have happen for worlds! No—because he had seduced her—he had injured her cruelly at the beginning—he had goaded her as it were to desperation;—because, also, he had pardoned her for what she had done to him, and she was now settled honourably and respectably in the world. These were the reasons wherefore he did not seek, and could never desire, to punish her for *the past*; and unless he were well assured that she was indeed guilty of a new crime, and this crime of the blackest dye, he would not take any measure that might tend to compromise her. Thus at the very instant when, in reply to Counsellor Sharply's reiterated question, he was about to reveal all those strange and terrible circumstances with which the reader is so well acquainted, a second thought sealed his lips; and he resolved to pause ere he adopted any step, which, if rashly and inconsiderately taken, might involve an unjust accusation against Fernanda for *the present*, but ruin her beyond all possibility of redemption for *the past*.

His continued silence, and the effect produced upon his countenance and manner by the conflicting feelings and bewildering thoughts which had thus swayed him from the moment when Counsellor Sharply first put the question above alluded to, all tended to prejudice him sorely in the eyes of the magistrate and strengthen the suspicions which every one present had already entertained against him.

"Well, I see that I must not hope for any satisfactory replies from this gentleman," said the barrister. "But I will yet ask him one more question," he continued, in a sinister tone: "and that is—how it was likely to happen that William Dudley was murdered *with his own knife*?"

"With his own knife!" repeated Arthur Eaton, in an amazement which was truly most unfeigned, but which was easily mistaken for the sudden excitement and alarm attendant on the discovery of an incident associated with conscious guilt.

"Yes—with his own knife!" reiterated Counsellor Sharply. "May I request your worship to produce and inspect the weapon?"

And while the magistrate was complying with this demand, a silence so breathless pervaded the court that a pin might have been heard to drop. And Rose Foster could hear the palpitations of her own heart as it beat violently and rapidly in the virgin bosom that remained upheaved and motionless with a profound suspense.

"I observe upon the handle of this knife," at length said the magistrate, "the initials *W. D.*"

A murmur of surprise mingled with the profoundest interest passed through the court; and nearly all eyes were instantaneously turned upon Rose Foster as much as to assure her that she would soon be proved innocent. Then those looks were in another moment all centred on Arthur Eaton, who was so amazed by this new incident that he felt as if he were floundering in the mazes of a troubled dream where horror, peril, and wonder were all confusedly blended.

For the inference to be deduced from the circumstance respecting the knife was too clear not to strike him as well as everybody present. It seemed to show that inasmuch as Dudley was proved by the surgeon to have been murdered and had not committed suicide, it could only have been some one closely connected with him or living in the same house who could have obtained possession of that weapon wherewith the murder was accomplished.

"Your worship will please to observe," said Mr. Counsellor Sharply, "that it was upon discovering those initials on the knife this morning that I requested the postponement of the proceedings, and that I likewise wrote upon a slip of paper the demand that Mr. Eaton should be detained until the issue of the adjourned examination. If your worship had not assented to that proposition, I should have at once applied in open court for a warrant against Mr. Eaton——"

"You dare not accuse me, sir," exclaimed Arthur, his cheeks flushing with indignation: "I am innocent——nay, I am incapable—utterly incapable of such a crime——"

"And I also am innocent!" exclaimed Rose, clasping her hands and bursting into tears—for now that she saw the turn the proceedings were so

rapidly taking, her emotions of joy for herself and sorrow for Arthur Eaton swelled into a tide that broke down the barrier of her fortitude and found its vent in a flood of copious weeping.

"Compose yourself — my dear child — compose yourself," said a familiar voice; and, raising her head abruptly, Rose found that Mrs. Brace was by her side in the dock.

At this moment Mr. Peter Grumley and his man Mobbs entered the court; and going straight up to Counsellor Sharply, they whispered earnestly with that learned gentleman for a few minutes.

"A presentiment tells me that you will not be many more minutes here," said the milliner, in a low tone of touching tenderness admirably assumed.

Rose cast a glance of deep gratitude upon Mrs. Brace for that assurance; and the milliner, unprincipled and profligate as she was, felt a pang of remorse pass poignantly through her bosom as she remembered all the persecution, misery, and suffering which the poor orphan had experienced at her hands.

"Has anything new transpired?" demanded the magistrate, addressing himself to Mr. Counsellor Sharply, who had just desisted from whispering to the two police-constables.

"Yes, your worship—and something of the highest importance," responded the learned gentleman.

Once more did a breathless silence and a sensation of painful suspense pervade the court.

"Proceed with your evidence, Mr. Sharply," said the magistrate.

"I call Peter Grumley to the witness-box," exclaimed the barrister, the expression of whose countenance was most mysteriously knowing.

And Mr. Grumley, having entered the box, was duly sworn to the effect that the evidence he was about to give to the Court should be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help him God!

When this ceremony was accomplished, a stillness deep as that which follows a terrific rolling of thunder, once more reigned in the Police-Office; and inasmuch as the gentlemen of the long robe are amazingly fond of those proceedings the phases of which produce grand effects, Mr. Counsellor Sharply suffered at least a minute to elapse ere he chose to disturb a silence which in reality was characterised by an awe-inspiring solemnity.

At length he drew his gown over his shoulders, and addressing Peter Grumley, said, "I believe you have been somewhere during the interval of the adjournment which just now took place?"

"Yes, sir," was the reply. "Leastways me and my man Mobbs has been somewheres——"

"And whither have you been?" was the next leading question.

"To Lord Marchmont's House in Hanover Square," answered Grumley.

"What did you do there?"

"I searched the room which used to be occupied by the deceased William Dudley, and also the chamber belonging to the Hon. Mr. Eaton."

"But I believe you found nothing of any consequence in the former apartment?" said Mr. Sharply.

"No, sir—nothing," was the response.

"And in the latter—that is to say the bed-chamber occupied by the Hon. Mr. Eaton——"

"I found something *there*— in a chest of drawers——"

"Well — what was it?" demanded Counsellor Sharply.

"This blade of a knife," returned Grumley, producing the object mentioned.

The usher took it and handed it up to the magistrate, who immediately applied it to the knife which lay before him. It fitted exactly, and was evidently the blade which had been broken off from that knife!

A murmur of astonishment and horror ran through the Court: for now that circumstantial evidence pointed to Arthur Eaton as being beyond all possibility of doubt the murderer of William Dudley, the more subdued feelings that were previously attendant on the mere suspicion, became enhanced into a boundless wonder and an immense abhorrence,—wonder that such an ingenuous-looking young man could be so great a criminal—and abhorrence not only at the deed itself, but at the base attempt which had apparently been made to shift the burden and the responsibility of the guilt upon the shoulders of an innocent young girl.

"You are safe, my dear child," whispered the milliner with a triumphant accent in the ears of Rose Foster.

"God be thanked!" murmured the orphan, clasping her hands fervently. "But that gentleman—— Oh! that such wickedness should exist in the human heart——"

"Hush!" whispered Mrs. Brace: "he is going to speak!"

"Your worship will be pleased to hear me for a few moments," said Arthur Eaton, now recovering the faculty of speech which he had lost for nearly a minute when the last overwhelming incident had completed the chain of circumstantial evidence against him.

"I should certainly advise you to reserve your defence, Mr. Eaton," observed the magistrate, with an ominous significance.

"My defence!" ejaculated the young gentleman. "What am I to understand by those words?" he demanded, with mingled hauteur and indignation.

"I will explain myself more fully, sir," said the magistrate, in a stern tone and in a severe manner. "But in the first place, with regard to the young person still standing in the dock, I must declare that the evidence against her has not only totally failed, but that she is entitled to the deepest sympathy for having even for a moment been compelled to endure the anxiety, torture, and ignominy of a position in which she never ought to have been placed."

These words were greeted with an outburst of applause on the part of the spectators; while Rose, overcome by her feelings, fell weeping and sobbing convulsively into the arms of Mrs. Brace.

"I therefore," continued the magistrate, "have unfeigned pleasure in directing Miss Foster to leave the dock; and I assure her that in thus pronouncing her discharge, not a shadow of suspicion remains in my mind concerning her."

"No one is more delighted than myself at this acquittal of the young lady," exclaimed Arthur Eaton, with a generous frankness of manner which of course passed as the rankest and vilest hypocrisy with all present: then, haughtily indifferent to the sneers which curled the lips of those countenances that met his eyes, he added, "And I heartily beg Miss Foster's forgiveness for having in any way been instrumental in causing her the inconvenience

anxiety, and annoyance which she must have suffered."

But Rose heard him not: for, so overcome was she by her own feelings on finding her innocence so fully proven and hearing it so unequivocally proclaimed, that Mrs. Brace was compelled to lead her out of the Court into that private room where their former interview of this memorable day had taken place.

"Silence!" exclaimed the usher, the moment the door had closed behind the orphan girl and the milliner.

Arthur Eaton, who had been about to address the magistrate when this summons was made, folded his arms and remained silent; but the air of conscious innocence which he wore was interpreted by the spectators as the hardihood of a desperate criminality aided by a consummate hypocrisy.

"I must now recapitulate," said the magistrate, "certain points in the evidence which has been adduced in this case. In the first instance, Mr. Eaton declared that at the moment when Dudley fell, he rushed forward and caught a glimpse of a lady in black darting into a passage opposite. Now this was a passage running due north; and it was completely on the southern side of the building that Miss Foster was immediately afterwards captured. The next fact which I must notice is that the deceased was evidently murdered by means of a knife belonging to himself, and of which no stranger was likely to obtain possession. But then comes a still more grave, important, and serious circumstance: for the very blade which belonged to this knife and which was broken off, is found in Mr. Eaton's apartment. With such evidence before me, I have only one course to adopt—which is to declare that you, Arthur Eaton, do stand committed to his Majesty's prison of Newgate to take your trial at the ensuing Sessions, on the charge of murder."

"I can only say to your worship," spoke Eaton, in a firm and resolute voice, "that I am innocent of this foul deed which is imputed to me,—as innocent as I *now* firmly believe that young girl to be whom you have just discharged from the dock. That a tremendous mass of circumstantial evidence has accumulated against me, I readily admit: but there is a key to the reading of this terrible mystery—a clue to the unravelling of this skein of incidents, at present so tangled and so complicated. That is however *my* secret for the present: useless and unavailing were it to enter upon any explanations at this moment or in this place. No—for a more solemn occasion and a higher tribunal shall be reserved a narrative the details of which will cause every heart to thrill with horror throughout the land, and turn into sympathy and commiseration the loathing and abhorrence which in the meantime may attach unto me. I have now no more to say: your worship has resolved upon committing me for trial—and I am forced to bow to that decision."

Having thus spoken in a firm and manly tone, the Hon. Arthur Eaton resigned himself to the constables who stood ready to lead him away from the Police-Office; and as he traversed the crowd which opened to afford him and the officers room to pass, he was astonished to perceive that those looks which had so recently surveyed him with horror and aversion, now contemplated him with a mournful interest and a sorrowful compassion.

"They are already convinced of my innocence," he thought within himself: and, his eyes filling with tears, he threw glances of mute but eloquent gratitude around him.

"Poor fellow!" whispered one individual to another.

"Yes—it is as you say," was the response given by the person thus addressed. "He is decidedly mad——"

"A mon omaniac——"

"And his mania is *murder!*"

These remarks, rapidly exchanged in a low tone, were by no means intended to be overheard by the Hon. Arthur Eaton: they nevertheless met his ears—and striking with an almost overwhelming violence upon his brain, they produced a shock which made him reel and stagger as if he were about to fall.

But the constables sustained him with their vigorous arms: and as they hurried him out of the Office, the last words that fell upon his ears were—"*Poor fellow! he is a monomaniac!*"

CHAPTER CXXVII.

THE PRIVATE ROOM AT THE POLICE-OFFICE.

It was some short time before Rose Foster could so far recover her mental composure as to say to herself, "I must now think of what course I ought to adopt!" But when she did thus speak with the silent voice of her own soul, she threw her eyes with an instinctive shuddering upon Mrs. Brace, who was seated alone with her in the private room adjoining the public Office.

For the young orphan was suddenly reminded by all the reminiscences which swept through her brain that she was more or less indebted to the milliner for the speedy acquittal which had been brought about; and she trembled lest Mrs. Brace, forgetful of the promises made when they were previously alone together in that room, should propose to take her back again home to Pall Mall!

Mrs. Brace perceived the half-terrified, half-appealing look which the orphan had thrown upon her; and she was about to answer in words that glance which spoke so eloquently in its mute significance, when the door opened and Mr. Grumley entered the room.

"Well, ma'am," he exclaimed, in a hoarse bassoon voice, "the young lady has got off, you see. Miss Foster," he continued, "I congratulate you on the result."

"I thank you most cordially for all the sympathy you have shown and the assistance you have afforded me," said Rose in a tone of fervent gratitude. "But what has been decided in respect to Mr. Eaton?"

"Committed for trial," responded Grumley, in a laconic manner.

"And is it possible that he can be guilty?" exclaimed Rose.

"Can't say," returned the wary constable. "Don't wentur' an opinion, Miss, when things seems so very orkard. *You're* safe out on it—and that's enough for the present."

Rose was about to make some additional remark when a knock was heard at the door; and Mr. Grumley hastened to answered the summons.

"A gentleman wants to speak to Miss Foster," said Mobbs, who appeared in the passage outside.

"A gentleman—to speak to me!" exclaimed the

orphan, overhearing the announcement: then, instantly reflecting that it might be Meagles, of whose treatment at the hands of the Government she was totally ignorant, she said hastily, "I will receive him here—in the presence of——"

And she stopped short as she glanced towards Mrs. Brace; for it suddenly struck her that it was in the milliner's house that Meagles had appeared to deliver her—and he would doubtless be alike astonished and indignant to observe that she was on friendly terms with the woman who had persecuted her.

But all her uneasiness on this point was dissipated in a moment: for instead of beholding Meagles enter the room as she had expected, she instantly recognised that same tall, thin, pale, but very handsome and interesting young man in whose company she had found herself for a few minutes on a certain occasion, in the waiting-room of the Earl of Desborough's mansion.

Advancing with evident timidity towards Rose, the young man took off his hat, bowed gracefully, and said, "You doubtless have forgotten me, Miss Foster—indeed, I cannot possibly suppose that you remember to have ever met me before——"

And he stopped short, for he perceived the looks of Mrs. Brace fixed angrily and suspiciously upon him. Indeed, this lady recollected perfectly well having seen him before: but where or under what circumstances she could not, for the life of her, call to mind.

As for Mr. Grumley—not being interested in the present scene, he walked to the window whistling one of the tunes to which he had sung a bacchanalian song at the free-and-easy where he had passed the greater portion of the previous night.

"It would be a ridiculous affectation on my part, sir," observed Rose, in reply to the young gentleman's remarks,—"were I to declare that I do not remember you."

"Then you recollect that we have met before?" exclaimed the stranger, a perceptible gleam of satisfaction lighting up his pale countenance.

"Yes—for a few minutes—at the Earl of Desborough's," responded Rose;—and Mrs. Brace, overhearing what was said, instantly called to mind the fact that it was so.

"Curiosity led me into the Court a few minutes ago," continued the young man: "for as I was passing through the street I heard the observations which certain loungers at the door were making upon the proceedings within. I accordingly entered, little suspecting that the young lady of whom the people outside were talking was known even by sight to me. With difficulty I forced my way through the crowd; and at the same moment that I succeeded in obtaining admission to the Court, you were leaving it in company with that lady;"—and the stranger glanced towards Mrs. Brace. "I recognised you instantaneously," he continued, fixing his eyes upon Rose with an expression of tender interest and respectful admiration: "Oh! yes—I knew you again immediately—for since I saw you that day at the Earl of Desborough's, I have thought of you often—very often!"

The countenance of the young maiden became suddenly suffused with a deep blush as these words fell upon her ear;—and she glanced timidly towards Mrs. Brace to ascertain whether she had overheard that delicate compliment—for such indeed it was, and uttered too in a tone so fervid and sincere, but accompanied with a manner so profoundly respectful and timidly deprecating, that even the pure-minded, innocent, and artless Rose Foster could not possibly take offence.

But at the very moment when the maiden thus threw her rapid glance towards Mrs. Brace, Mr. Grumley, turning away from the window, accosted that lady, saying, "P'raps it would be as well, ma'am, if you and me was to have a few minutes' talk together; seeing as how that I must be off almost directly."

Mrs. Brace accordingly rose from the seat which she had occupied near the fire, and hastened to converse apart with Mr. Grumley in the window-recess.

"You may conceive, Miss Foster," now resumed the stranger, drawing nearer to her and speaking in a lower tone than at first, "how surprised—how shocked—how pained I was to behold in you the heroine of this day's sad proceedings. But, no—you cannot conceive what my feelings were, because you are ignorant how deep was the impression you made upon me during the few minutes that we conversed together at Desborough House."

Rose started—surveyed the young man with astonishment for a few moments—and then, casting down her eyes, blushed deeply.

"Oh! do not be offended with me," he said, in so earnest, sincere, and appealing a tone that no measure of resentment could have withstood it: "I would sooner die than cause you pain—for God knows you have this day endured enough! But I was telling you how shocked I was ere now to recognise in the accused Rose Foster that same young lady whose image has ever been present in my memory since first we met at the Earl's mansion in Berkeley Square: but that first feeling of anguish on your account was almost instantaneously relieved by the intelligence that you were discharged—and then a burning joy filled my soul when I heard that your innocence had been made manifest beyond all possibility of doubt. Yes—Oh! yes—I wept tears of ecstacy and bliss at the issue of that painful ordeal through which you have passed;—and I overheard persons near me saying, '*He is perhaps the young lady's brother?*'—'*No,*' replied some one better informed than they: '*Miss Foster is not only an orphan, but has neither brother nor sister, nor any near relation.*'—Then I thought how happy I should be if I were your brother: for I also am an orphan, and without a single relative in the whole wide world," added the young man mournfully.

There was something in this announcement which touched the tenderest chord in the heart of Rose Foster; and, raising her eyes, she surveyed the stranger with a look of benevolent feeling and compassionate interest. That avowal which *he* had just made, seemed to establish as it were a secret affinity between them: the identity of their orphan positions in the world appeared to place them all in a moment on a footing of friendliness. The barrier of cold reserve was suddenly removed: the diffidence of strangers was annihilated. Those words—"*For I also am an orphan!*" were a better—Oh! far better introduction on the part of that pale but handsome young man to the poor but lovely maiden, than if a Duke or a Duchess had presented him to her with all the usual forms and ceremonies—hollow words and meaningless obeisances!

"Yes—I thought how happy I should be, were I

really able to step forward and claim you as a sister," continued the young man, encouraged by the look of tender interest which Rose had cast upon him: "and while this idea was yet oscillating in my mind, I overheard the same person who had last spoken say, '*Yes, poor girl! she lost her parents under the cruellest circumstances: for I was living next door to them at the time.*'—Then this individual began to narrate some distressing tale to those near him; while I, unable to restrain my feelings any longer, determined to present myself to you—offer you my congratulations on the triumphant issue of this day's proceedings—and beseech you, Miss Foster, to regard me henceforth as a friend."

These last words were uttered in a low tremulous tone, and with a certain hesitation of manner: for the stranger was evidently fearful of giving offence to that maiden whose mind he felt convinced was as pure as her person was beautiful.

"I am deeply—deeply grateful to you for the kind interest which you have shown in my behalf," said Miss Foster, her own voice trembling with emotions profoundly stirred. "But since you are acquainted with my name, permit me to inquire that of one whose friendly conduct of this evening will never be effaced from my memory."

"My name is George Woodfall," was the response; "and I am by profession an artist. But let us now speak of yourself, Miss Foster—for I am determined to act as your friend; and if the identity of orphanage do not give me this right and even impose this duty, then human nature has no ties and society no sympathies beyond mere conventionalities and empty, hollow flatteries. Tell me, then, Miss Foster, tell me whether you have kind friends to take care of you—a happy home to receive you——"

"Home!—the orphan's home!" murmured the young maiden, her bosom heaving with a profound sigh, approaching almost to a subdued sob, at the same time.

"Oh! then I may yet be enabled to serve you, Miss Foster!" exclaimed George Woodfall, with impassioned ardour alike in his tone and manner; "and I beseech—I implore—I entreat you to look upon me as a friend who would lay down his life to save you a single pang."

"Mr. Woodfall," said Rose, wiping away the tears which had started forth upon her long lashes at the mention of the word "*home*,"—and now as she fixed her sweet blue eyes upon the young artist's countenance, there was something so melting in their expression and so softly touching in her whole aspect, that he felt as if he had known and loved her from their very infancy;—"Mr. Woodfall," she said, "I am totally unable to find words to convey an idea of all the gratitude I feel for this most generous, unexpected, and disinterested behaviour on your part. As candidly as you have spoken to me, so frankly will I answer you;—and my answer is," she added, her voice sinking to a low and tremulous whisper, "that I have no friends to take care of me—no home to receive me!"

"But that lady?" said Woodfall, casting his eyes towards Mrs. Brace, who was in deep conference with Grumley in the window-recess.

"That is Mrs. Brace, the milliner," responded the orphan, again wiping away the tears from her eyes. "I was in her service—but certain circumstances—which I cannot now mention——in fine, I will not return to her establishment——"

And she looked shudderingly towards the milliner: for although she had forgiven that woman—although she believed her to be penitent for the past—and although she felt grateful to her for the manner in which she had behaved relative to the proceedings which had just terminated,—the young girl nevertheless recoiled from the idea of venturing back again into a house where she had already endured so much, and where she would again be exposed to the persecutions of the Prince of Wales.

"Miss Foster," said George Woodfall, suddenly breaking a silence which had lasted for upwards of a minute—and he looked the maiden full in the face as he spoke;—"Miss Foster, can you—will you—dare you trust me? Or is your experience of the world of too bitter a nature to permit you to put any confidence in a stranger?"

"Mr. Woodfall," replied the young girl, firmly, "not for an instant will I return your generosity by the ingratitude of even leaving you in a state of uncertainty respecting the sentiments with which you have inspired me. Those sentiments are the most implicit confidence in the nobility of your character and the fullest reliance upon your honour. For are we not both orphans?" she demanded, in a tone of the most touching pathos: "and do we not know too well how sorrowful is the lot of orphanage to have the heart to aggravate that woe or enhance that affliction?"

"God forbid that *I* should be capable of such iniquity!" exclaimed Woodfall, fervently. "You have declared that you can place confidence in me—and I thank you: you have said that you will put reliance upon me—and you shall receive at my hands the respect, the attention, and the protection with which a brother would surround a well-beloved and cherished sister. Know, then, my dear Miss Foster," he continued, "that though a humble artist, I have recently made several friends in the sphere of aristocracy and fashion. Thanks to the patronage of the Earl of Desborough and his amiable Countess the introductions I have received to some noble families open to me the most brilliant prospects;'—and as Woodfall thus spoke, the warm glow of high aspirations appeared upon his cheeks and poured a flood of light into his intelligent eyes. "But amongst the introductions which I have obtained through the interest of Lord and Lady Desborough," he proceeded after a few moments' pause, "none has given me greater pleasure than that which has rendered me acquainted with the Marchioness of Bellenden. Have you ever heard of that excellent, generous-hearted, and amiable lady?"

"Yes," replied Rose Foster: "her mansion, which is called the Priory, is in the Edgeware Road, at no great distance from the house which I was once enabled to call my home."

"You have heard, then, of the Marchioness of Bellenden," said Woodfall; "and you are therefore well acquainted with the admirable reputation which she bears?"

"My father and mother were wont to speak of her as a lady who did honour to that aristocratic sphere to which she belonged," said Rose,—"instead of deriving any honour therefrom."

"And your parents rightly estimated her character," exclaimed Woodfall. "Would you, then, accept a home at Bellenden Priory?"

The maiden gave no immediate answer: but she fixed her eyes upon the artist with a mingled expression of reproach and doubt—as if to intimate that it would be cruel of him to trifle with her feelings, and yet that she could scarcely believe him to be capable of such ungenerous conduct.

"Miss Foster, I am serious," he hastened to observe. "Do not wrong me by a suspicion——"

"Oh! pardon me, Mr. Woodfall," she exclaimed: "but I feared lest in your anxiety to serve me, you might be over-rating your ability—or at least that you fancied others to possess hearts as good and generous as your own, and as willing to afford the friendless orphan a home——"

"The Marchioness of Bellenden will receive you with open arms," interrupted Woodfall, with the solemn seriousness of one who was confident in the assertion he was making. "Your misfortunes will endear you to her: and moreover, even before I knew your name—which I only learnt ere now—I have spoken of you to her ladyship——"

"Spoken of me!" exclaimed the orphan, once more throwing upon the artist a look which if not actually laden with suspicion, was at least mistrustful enough to give him pain.

"Oh! now you doubt me again!" he murmured, in a tone of mingled reproach and vexation. "But it is natural—I am a stranger——"

"Once more I beseech you to pardon me," said Rose: and, yielding to the impulse of that ingenuous fervour which made her feel that she was but ill-requiting the young man for all his kindness and disinterested attention towards her, she extended her hand, observing, "I was wrong to doubt you even for a moment: and indeed it was not doubt—but rather amazement and wonder——"

"That I should have ever mentioned you to the Marchioness?" exclaimed Woodfall, taking the fair hand of the orphan and pressing it gently in

his own. "But have I not already told you that your image has dwelt in my memory since the moment when we first met at the house of Lord Desborough in Berkeley Square? Is it surprising, then, that I should have spoken of you as the *fair unknown* to a lady who condescends to express an interest in my welfare?"

"Mr. Woodfall," said Rose, casting down her eyes and withdrawing the hand which she had abstractedly suffered to linger in his own for a few moments,—"I know not how I could have merited the good opinion which you so generously formed of me——"

"We will not talk upon that subject for the present," interrupted the artist, in a gentle tone. "Time is wearing on—it is already six o'clock," he added, consulting his watch, which was a gift from Lord Desborough; "and you must be anxious to depart from a place which is not calculated to excite the most pleasurable reminiscences."

Rose Foster gave not an immediate reply: but pressing her hand to her brow, she mentally took a rapid survey of her position. To return to Mrs. Brace's establishment was not to be thought of: to receive money from her was to accept a boon which would give that woman a species of right to visit her at any lodging where she might settle herself. Such a proceeding suited not the views of the orphan who was anxious to withdraw herself entirely from that channel of existence into which she had blindly and unadvisedly launched herself in the first instance, and which had so nearly hurried her on to destruction. But Meagles and Melmoth—what of them?—were they forgotten by the young girl! No—oh! no: but the former was an unmarried man at whose hands she could not directly seek protection; and not for a minute would she think of again becoming a burthen to the latter. For be it remembered that she was totally unaware of all that had happened to both of them.

What, then, did the orphan decide upon? Not to return to Mrs. Brace's establishment: nor to receive any succour, pecuniary, or otherwise, at her hands. No—nor yet to appeal to Meagles, nor fly for refuge to the poor working man. But she resolved upon trusting to George Woodfall—this new friend whom Providence appeared to have sent her at the moment of a cruelly embarrassing extremity. For the alternative with the poor maiden was to procure a home,—an asylum where she would enjoy personal security and mental peace. And this home—was it not now offered to her?

"Miss Foster, you appear to hesitate—you are undecided?" said the artist. "My God! do you still doubt me? Oh! if I did not entertain a true, sincere, and holy interest in your welfare, this utter want of confidence on your part would prompt me to bid you a sorrowful farewell and retire."

"How often am I destined thus to wound your generous feelings by that semblance of suspicion which my manner so unfortunately assumes?" exclaimed Rose, once more proffering her hand which the artist took with a joy that he could not conceal: but this joy was mingled with so profound a respect that so far from shocking even the most delicate sensibility, it could only serve as a proof of his honest sincerity.

"Then you accept the proposal which I have made you, Miss Foster?" he said.

"Alas! I have no alternative—poor orphan that I am!" she murmuringly answered, her eyes filling with tears.

"The Marchioness of Bellenden will welcome you as cordially and as warmly as if you were a sister or a daughter," rejoined Woodfall. "And now—if you will say farewell to Mrs. Brace——"

"One word," ejaculated Rose Foster, in a low but hurried whisper, as she glanced almost in affright towards the milliner, who was still conversing with Grumley in the window-recess: "I do not wish Mrs. Brace to know whither I am going. This may appear singular to you;—but on a future occasion—when we are better acquainted—I will explain my reasons——"

"Never shall I seek to penetrate farther into your confidence than you may be willing to admit me," interrupted George Woodfall. "The friendship which I proffer you claims no rights—asserts no privileges—imposes no conditions: it is the friendship—the love—the affection which a brother may offer to a sister!"

"And as such do I accept and reciprocate it," answered Rose, profoundly touched by the sense of all that was noble, generous, delicate, and considerate in the language, manner, and conduct of the young artist.

CHAPTER CXXVIII.

MRS. BRACE AND MR. PETER GRUMLEY.

The room in which the preceding dialogue had taken place, was large though not lofty: and thus, while Rose Foster and George Woodfall were discoursing near the fire-place, nothing that passed between them was overheard by the milliner and the head constable who were holding their conference in the window-recess.

And now let us see what were the topics of conversation with this latter couple.

"Well, ma'am," observed Mr. Grumley, in a low and confidential tone, as Mrs. Brace accompanied him apart into the window-recess, "I suppose you ain't very sorry that the present business has come off so well."

"On the contrary," returned the milliner, "I can scarcely restrain my joy. You certainly managed the affair excellently——"

"Indeed, ma'am," interrupted Mr. Peter Grumley, "there was no management in the matter at all. The thing took its regular course—and there was no necessity for me to make use of any artifice or stratagem whatsomever."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, surveying the head-constable with the most unaffected astonishment. "The inculpation of Arthur Eaton——"

"Was brought about by the natural course of events, ma'am," rejoined the officer. "Everything went on as smooth as possible; and justice received nothing more than the ordinary amount of help, and certainly not the slightest shadow of hindrance."

"I am totally at a loss what to think or how to understand you, Mr. Grumley," said the milliner. "In the first place, did you not contrive the little incident of the discovery of the blade of the knife in Mr. Eaton's own apartment at his father's

mansion?—did you not contrive this incident, I ask, for the purpose of procuring Miss Foster's immediate acquittal?"

"No such a thing, ma'am!" exclaimed Grumley, with almost an expression of indignation upon his countenance. "I don't do business in that fashion, I can assure you. Besides, how do you suppose that I could procure a broken blade to fit so exactly as the one did that was produced in court just now?"

"Well, well—I perceive that you do not choose to be too communicative, Mr. Grumley," said Mrs. Brace, her arch smile displaying the fine teeth which shone like ivory betwixt the moist coral of her luscious lips. "Keep your own counsel—I shall not attempt to pry into your secrets. All that you undertake you evidently manage so well that those who employ you ought to be satisfied with the results and not seek to ascertain how those consequences have been brought about. I have not forgotten your remark that when the means do not present themselves of their own accord you invent or devise them."

"Yes, ma'am—and so does every long-headed person in this world to a certain extent," observed Grumley, softening in his manner as his libidinous eyes feasted themselves upon the milliner's full bosom, which was much exposed in consequence of the rich scarf being thrown back on account of the heat of the room. "But I see that you don't precisely understand the events of this afternoon," continued Grumley, edging closer towards Mrs. Brace and bending his tall form somewhat so as to be enabled to maintain a confidential kind of whispering in her ear. "The fact is that I was quite sure all along of Miss Foster's innocence; and I knowed that if any one could make it appear, Counsellor Sharply was the man. But I must candidly confess that at first things seemed to go bad enough against the young lass, till a slight turn took place when it was proved that she was running off in one direction while the lady in black which Mr. Eaton saw had fled in another. Then, you see, the suspicion instantly arose that Mr. Eaton might have invented *his* lady in black;—and immediately afterwards comes the extraordinary affair of the knife with the initials upon it. As a matter of course, Counsellor Sharply seized on them two pints; and he asked for a remand to enable me and Mobbs to go and make a search at Lord Marchmont's house in Hanover Square. Well, I can't say that I expected to find anything important there, although such-like investigations have at times led to the most extraordinary discoveries. And such did it prove so be in this instance: for, lo and behold! in one of Mr. Eaton's drawers, just underneath his clean shirts, we found that very blade which we produced in Court."

"And do you really believe Mr. Eaton to be the murderer?" demanded Mrs. Brace, fixing her eyes keenly upon the constable's countenance.

"Well—I'm not in the habit of giving a hasty or rash opinion," said the officer, in a musing tone: "for don't you see, ma'am, it's a sort of pint of honour with us never to be mistaken in any way or out in our reckoning. If we didn't preserve the character of *infallibility*—that's the word, ma'am—we should lose all the confidence that's placed in us. So, you perceive, it don't suit us to wenter' an opinion *until* we're sure that it's the right one. At the same time, I don't mind whispering to you, ma'am—for you're such a very nice lady, that you could wheedle me out of anything——"

"I am really gratified by the compliment, Mr. Grumley," exclaimed Mrs. Brace, laughing. "But you were about to give me your opinion in a confidential manner?" she added, interrogatively.

"And my opinion is, ma'am," rejoined the officer, "that Mr. Eaton will find it precious difficult to convince a jury that he is innocent. But he won't be hung, ma'am—he won't be hung," added Grumley, looking as solemnly mysterious as a drunken parson trying to seem sober while preaching his sermon: "for this is what will get him off, ma'am—this is what will get him off:" and the constable tapped his forehead significantly.

"Ah! I understand you," said Mrs. Brace, really experiencing some degree of interest in this portion of the conversation: for she had not failed to observe, while in court, that Mr. Eaton was a very handsome and prepossessing young man. "He is not to be held accountable for his actions?" she added, inquiringly.

"Just so," responded Grumley.

"And therefore," continued Mrs. Brace, "your opinion is that he committed the murder in a fit of monomania—or, at all events, while labouring under some aberration of the intellect——"

"Well, I suppose that's about the long and short of the matter," said the constable. "You now understand, ma'am, at all events, that the discovery of the blade of the knife was as regular and straightforard a transaction on the part of me and Mobbs as such a thing could possibly be. The truth is that although I'd go a great way to get a person off, no matter whether innocent or guilty — yet I wouldn't for the world play any tricks to shove the load of guilty on to the shoulders that ought not to bear it. In Miss Foster's case, I let things take their natural course, so that I might see what would turn up; and if circumstantial evidence had borne her down altogether, *then* I should have began to consider how I was to save her. But as her innocence transpired in the regular way, I was not called upon to step out of the usual path. So much for that case: but with respect to t'other——"

"Caroline Walters, you mean?" exclaimed Mrs. Brace: then, as a sudden gloom spread over her countenance, she observed, "I cannot, for the life of me, comprehend how you hope to save that unfortunate girl."

"Haven't I promised that she should be saved?" demanded Grumley, in that tone of dogged confidence which men of his class and stamp are so apt to assume when they are impressed with the conviction of their ability to achieve a particular end.

"You have promised, certainly," returned Mrs. Brace: "but——"

"And isn't there another five hundred guineas to be paid over to me, if I succeed?" exclaimed the constable.

"Yes—and the sum shall be forthcoming with as much pleasure as promptitude on my part," rejoined the milliner.

"Then don't be under any apprehension, ma'am," said Grumley. "What I have undertaken to do, I shall perform; and you'll have to pay me over the five hundred yaller boys to-morrow night. But I give you due warning that the evidence is so strong against Caroline Walters, it will be impossible to get her off by *fair* means."

"I care not how the affair is managed, so that she be rescued from the grasp of justice," exclaimed the milliner. "But why did not her case come on to-day before the Lambeth justices of peace?"

"Because I had the investigation of the affair put into my hands," answered Grumley; "and in consequence of the understanding which was come to with me at Carlton House this morning, I immediately sent one of my underlings over to the Lambeth authorities to let 'em know that Caroline Walters musn't be brought up till to-morrow, as I expected to have the case completely made out against her by that time."

"Then you have taken an ostensibly hostile attitude towards her?" exclaimed Mrs. Brace.

"How the devil could I do otherwise?" demanded Mr. Grumley. "Aint I the head officer of Bow Street?—and must not people in authority maintain at least a show of consistency and propriety? But don't be alarmed—everything will go on as it ought to do—and the lass shall escape to-morrow evening as sure as I'm standing here."

"And you will give her fifty guineas and tell her to get out of the country as soon as possible," said Mrs. Brace.

"I'll not only give her the money, but also a safe disguise into the bargain," returned the constable. "Lord bless ye, ma'am—I never do things by halves! But what are you going to do with that sweet young gal there?" inquired Mr. Grumley, glancing over his shoulder in the direction of Rose Foster, who was in earnest and whispering discourse with George Woodfall.

"I shall keep my promise and let her go whithersoever she chooses," responded the milliner, who was by no means inclined to run any more risks of exposure and ruin by assisting the designs of the Prince of Wales in respect to the lovely orphan.

"That young chap seems to be getting precious tender towards her," whispered Grumley, again glancing over his shoulder and observing the respectful admiration and soft solicitude with which George Woodfall was contemplating Rose Foster. "P'raps he's making her a hoffer of marriage."

"I wish to heaven he was," rejoined Mrs. Brace. "He would then take her so completely off my hands that I should not be compelled to furnish her with any of my own hard-earned gold to set her afloat in the world."

"Well, ma'am, I shall say good bye to you now," observed Mr. Peter Grumley: "and if you'll be at home—and alone—to-morrow night between ten and eleven o'clock, I shall take the liberty of dropping in to bring you the news about Miss Caroline Walters——"

"And receive your remaining five hundred guineas," added Mrs. Brace, with a smile. "You will be welcome, I can assure you."

Mr. Grumley threw upon the milliner a look which seemed to say that she was a very desirable person and had considerably inflamed his passions during the quarter of an hour's chat in the window-recess: and Mrs. Brace, penetrating what was passing in his mind, laughed in a low but merry manner at the idea of having captivated the huge, ugly, revolting, shabby-looking fellow who thus dared to regard her with such a libidinous fondness.

Had he been a handsome, dashing young nobleman, with yellow kid gloves and a scented cambric handkerchief, Mrs. Brace would have responded to his lustful glances with looks of piquant archness and voluptuous encouragement: but the sensitiveness of the fashionable milliner could only treat with a good-humoured ridicule the amorous pretensions of one whom she dared not offend by showing herself outraged and shocked at his conduct.

Heaving a profound sigh, Mr. Peter Grumley made a low bow to Mrs. Brace, and stalked out of the room;—and the noise of the door closing behind him, aroused George Woodfall and Rose Foster from the deep interest of the *tête-à-tête* which had at this moment reached the point specified at the close of the preceding chapter.

"Well, my dear child," said Mrs. Brace, accosting the young orphan with an appearance of so much maternal affability and kindness that George Woodfall could not help wondering at the extreme repugnance which Rose had demonstrated at the idea of returning into the milliner's establishment,—"what course have you determined to adopt?—and in what manner can I be serviceable to you?"

"This gentleman," said Rose, indicating the artist with a glance, and speaking in a tone of modest decision and maidenly firmness which at once convinced the milliner that some definite plan had been already resolved upon by the orphan girl, even if it were not actually arranged in concert with the young man who stood beside her,—"this gentleman," she said, "is Mr. Woodfall—and through his kind, benevolent, and compassionate aid, I expect to find a home at the abode of a lady with whom he is acquainted."

"I am perfectly aware that I have not the least right to demand of you an account of your conduct," said Mrs. Brace, now feeling herself piqued inasmuch as she saw that the orphan had purposely avoided naming the lady and mentioning the address whereunto she had alluded. "But at the same time," continued the milliner, almost immediately recovering her good humour, "I am overjoyed to hear that your prospects are so agreeable—and I wish you all possible happiness to compensate for the misery you have endured this day."

"Farewell, Mrs. Brace," said Rose, tendering her hand to the milliner. "Once more do I thank you for your kindness in this affair."

"And you will forget the past, dear Rose?" whispered Mrs. Brace, as she stooped forward and kissed her upon the cheek.

"Yes—I have promised to do so, and I will keep my word," responded the orphan.

The milliner then took her departure; and a few minutes afterwards George Woodfall and Rose Foster entered a hackney-coach which had been sent for at their request.

A considerable crowd was gathered in the street to catch a glimpse of the charming girl as she came forth from the Office; and loud cheers welcomed her as the artist handed her into the vehicle.

The coach drove rapidly away: the multitude dispersed—and while Rose Foster was being conducted to the mansion of the Marchioness of Bellenden, the Hon. Arthur Eaton was entering a solitary cell within the sinister-looking walls of Newgate.

CHAPTER CXXIX.

CAROLINE WALTERS.

It was about twenty minutes to one o'clock in the afternoon of the following day, that a hackney-coach stopped at the gate of Horsemonger Lane Gaol; and two men leapt forth.

These were Mr. Peter Grumley and his factotum Mobbs; and on entering the lobby, they were instantaneously saluted in familiar terms by the turnkey on duty.

"Come for the young 'ooman, eh?" said this functionary, when the usual compliments accompanied by a little chaffing had been exchanged.

"Yes," responded Grumley. "How has she behaved herself, old feller?"

"Silent, reserved, and obstinate," was the answer. "She's a pretty gal—a deuced pretty gal: but there's moments when the devil looks out of her eyes. I couldn't help surweying her with attention when I went round last night to lock up; and I thought to myself, thinks I, '*Well, I'm blowed if you ain't capable of murdering anybody that stands in your path.*'"

"And so she hasn't talked at all—eh?" observed Grumley, interrogatively.

"She hasn't said nothing either bad, good, or indifferent," answered the turnkey. "The matron tried to draw her out yesterday—but it was no go, I understand; and so I suppose she means to see what turn matters may take, before she opens her lips on the subject."

"Well, then, she'll soon have an opportunity of satisfying her curiosity," observed Grumley: "for she'll be committed to-day to a certainty. I've got a precious strong case against her, I can tell you."

"Oh! I s'pose there's no doubt about it," remarked the turnkey, as he opened the inner door of the lobby and ordered some underling to fetch Caroline Walters from her cell.

In a few minutes the young girl made her appearance, in the custody of the underling just alluded to; and, being transferred to the charge of Grumley and Mobbs, she accompanied the officials into the hackney-coach which immediately drove away.

Caroline Walters was deadly pale—and, as this pallor showed through the brunette hue of her complexion, it gave a ghastly aspect to her countenance. Her fine dark eyes shone with a restless and sinister light which vibrated as a star: and her pearly teeth were clenched behind the closely compressed lips. There was an awful composure in her manner which, when considered in respect to her looks, seemed compounded of dark menace against some one and of a fixed and desperate resolution with reference to herself.

The moment the vehicle rolled away from the gate of Horsemonger Lane Prison, Mr. Grumley drew up the window on his side, while Mobbs did the same on the other; and then the head constable addressed himself in a hasty and laconic manner to Caroline.

"Miss Walters," he said, "we have not many minutes to converse together—and we must make the most of so short a time."

"What can you have to say to me?" she demanded, raising her eyes and glancing suspiciously from the ill-looking countenance of Grumley to the repulsive features of Mobbs—for the two constables were seated opposite to her in the vehicle.

"Listen—and don't interrupt me more than you can help, Miss," resumed the head officer. "Your case is a very bad one—and you're sure to be committed for trial. If committed for trial, you're sure to be found guilty and hung."

"I already perceive the weight of that circumstantial evidence which will be arrayed against me," answered Caroline, in a low and somewhat thick tone; "and I am prepared for the worst. But I shall at least have the satisfaction of giving a full and complete exposure of the iniquities of the immense brothel over which the arch-procuress Mrs. Brace presides, and which has for so many years helped to sustain the midwifery establishment in Fore Street."

These words were pronounced with a concentrated bitterness of feeling denoting the stern resolution which the young girl had adopted not to die unavenged.

"And moreover," she added, after a brief pause, "I will proclaim in the presence of the magistrate and the whole court the name of *him* who seduced me so vilely and abandoned me so cruelly. Oh! I will not pass through the disgrace of the Old Bailey and the hangman, without dragging others through the mire and the filth of public exposure, infamy, and shame."

And now the sinister light which burnt in her eyes flashed forth in those rays which carry a shudder with them through the entire frame that they appear to penetrate and into the depths of the soul to which they seem to pierce.

"Miss Walters," Grumley hastened to observe, "you must renounce your present plans and alter your policy altogether."

"What do you mean?" exclaimed the young girl, now surveying the constable with ineffable amazement.

"I mean, Miss Walters, that I am your friend—and that I will save you, if you will permit me to do it," responded Grumley, in a rapid tone.

"Save me!" repeated Caroline, clutching with a hysterical joy at the hope which fell thus suddenly upon her soul.

"Yes—save you from the scaffold, Miss," answered Grumley. "Now listen one moment. Whether innocent or guilty, you'll find that the evidence will be overwhelming against you—and you will likewise find that it's my own self as will have got up the case so strong against you."

"Then how can you proclaim yourself my friend?" asked Caroline, bitterly.

"Because I am compelled to do my dooty as a officer in the eyes of the *public*," replied Grumley, meeting unflinchingly the searching look which the girl threw upon him: "whereas *in private*," he added, "I may befriend and serve whomsoever I choose."

"I understand you," said Caroline, her confidence returning. "But wherefore should you feel any interest in me? I am an utter stranger to you——"

"True: but Mrs. Brace has enjoined me to do all I can for you——"

"Mrs. Brace!" repeated Caroline, in a tone of indescribable disgust. "Ah! yes—I understand—she fea a exposure, and she would conciliate me! Is it not so?"

"Never mind the reasons that she may have,

Miss," exclaimed Grumley. "It is snow for you to know that she has took up your case very kind indeed—and Counsellor Sharply is engaged to make a fight for you—and I'm resolved to save you, happen what will. But in order that our endeavours may be crowned with success, you must promise to do exactly what I tell you and act precisely as I shall point out."

"And will you guarantee my safety on those conditions?" demanded Caroline eagerly—for now that a hope was once more excited on her soul, she longed—oh! how eagerly she longed to live not only for the sake of life itself, but also for the purposes of her darkly-cherished vengeance!

"Miss Walters," said Grumley, in a firm, decisive, and almost arbitrary tone,—"you must stick to the path that I am about to chalk out for you, and then I'll guarantee your safety—but not unless."

"Tell me all that I am to do," observed the young girl, "and you shall find me obedient and docile."

"In the first place," resumed Grumley, "you must not be surprised if you see my man Mobbs here get up into the witness-box and say all he possibly can against you—because that's our vocation. Besides, it's necessary that we should appear rayther bitter against you than too kind, or else we should be suspected of *doing on purpose* the thing that's to happen arterwards, and which mustn't seem to be through any fault of our'n."

"I do not understand you, sir," said Caroline.

"But you will before the day's over, my dear," returned Grumley; "and you will bless your stars that you ever fell in with such a good-hearted creetur' as I am. For I tell you that by nine o'clock this evening you shall be free—at large—in safety—although things will go precious queer against you presently. But this is what you must do:—When all the evidence on the side of the prosecution has been disposed of, and the magistrate asks you what you have to say why you shouldn't be committed for trial, you must at once and emphatically declare your innocence."

"And I *am* innocent!" exclaimed Caroline, with a strange commingling of hauteur and indignation in her tone and manner.

"That's just the way to say it before the magistrate, Miss," observed Grumley, with as much coolness as if it were a mere stage-rehearsal. "His worship will then ask you what proof you have to advance—and Counsellor Sharply will probably recommend you to reserve your defence—because the Counsellor won't know what *my* after-plans are. But you must speak out boldly and say that if the magistrate will allow you to visit the house in Fore Street where the murder was committed, you will there show the constable who shall accompany you, the most striking and startling proofs of your innocence. Now, can you manage to say all this with a firm and resolute air—an air that looks like innocence, you know?"

"Assuredly I can," answered Caroline: "and the more so, inasmuch as I am innocent——Oh! my God—I am really and truly innocent—or may I perish this very moment! But proceed: what next am I to do?"

"Leave the rest to me," answered Grumley. "Only do what I have told you—and do it well—and I'll guarantee that you shan't sleep in a prison to-night. And what's more," added the head constable, "I am to give you fifty guineas for Mrs. Brace, which amiable lady has took a very lively interest in your welfare. But mind—not a word about vengeance against the late Mrs. Lindley—nor Mrs. Brace—nor against your seducer: all that kind of palaver will do the cause no good—and may prevent the magistrate from granting the request which you are to make. But here we are at his worship's house."

And as Mr. Peter Grumley uttered these last words, the hackney-coach stopped.

In the times of which we are writing there was no regularly established police-court on the Surrey side of the metropolis, and prisoners were accordingly taken to the dwellings of the justices of the peace residing in that district. It was therefore at the private residence of a local magistrate that the present case was to be investigated; but his worship had a large room fitted up with all the miniature conveniences similar to those which on a larger scale characterised the police-office in Bow Street. And this room was crowded to excess when Caroline Walters was introduced precisely as the clock struck one—the hour which his worship had appointed to take the case, when all the night-charges were disposed of.

Counsellor Sharply was seated in the little pew provided for the accommodation of counsel; and he bestowed a nod of recognition upon Mr. Peter Grumley as this official escorted Caroline Walters to the dock, the steps of which she mounted with a firmness of tread and of demeanour which produced different impressions on those present. For whereas in every assembly there is a majority of persons who are always inclined to look upon the dark and the evil side of human nature in preference to the bright and the good,—so on this occasion did the larger portion of the audience immediately attribute Caroline's manner to the hardihood of a guilt which strove to assume the brazen front of innocence,—while the minority of the spectators, who after all were the more humane as well as the better experienced, shook their heads mysteriously and said to themselves, "That young creature is a victim, and not a criminal!"

Rapid but searching was the glance which the prisoner threw around the Court to ascertain if there were any familiar faces there: and her looks settled upon the late Mrs. Lindley's two servants, who were seated on a bench together with one of the constables that had taken Caroline into custody on the night of the murder.

And now the examination commenced by the magistrate's clerk inquiring the prisoner's name, age, and profession. To these questions she responded in a firm but respectful tone; and Counsellor Sharply then intimated that he appeared on her behalf.

Mr. Peter Grumley, who had the management of the case, now made a sign for one of the deceased midwife's servants to enter the witness-box; and this female, having been sworn, deposed as follows:—

"I have been for twelve years in the service of the late Mrs. Lindley. She was a midwife, and received young ladies who wished to retire into seclusion during the period of their confinement. Miss Walters, the prisoner, became an inmate of the establishment in that manner, a few weeks ago. She was considered a young lady of very extraordinary disposition; and when she was confined, she manifested a great malignity of feeling towards Mrs. Lindley. The surgeon

who was called in to attend upon her, remonstrated with her upon the irritability which she showed towards Mrs. Lindley."

Here Caroline, who had kept her eyes fixed upon the floor from the first moment that the witness began speaking, looked suddenly up and exclaimed, "Oh! if I might explain to your worship the reasons which made me hate and abhor that Mrs. Lindley——"

"You shall speak presently," interrupted the magistrate.

Caroline stopped short—and as she glanced her eyes rapidly round, ere she bent them down again, she caught the reproving look which Counsellor Sharply threw upon her—for the learned gentleman was naturally horrified at the immense damage which the prisoner had just inflicted upon her own case by the admission which she had made relative to feelings of hatred and abhorrence in respect to the deceased.

The female servant continued her deposition:—

"I believe there was some quarrel or dispute between the deceased and Miss Walters the evening before the one on which the murder took place. For on that evening Mrs. Lindley locked Miss Walters up in her bed-chamber; and all next day she was kept a prisoner in her room. I took up her meals—and each time when I went into the chamber, I found Miss Walters very much excited—dashing her hand violently against her forehead, and muttering dark threats against Mrs. Lindley and her seducer. But she did not say who her seducer was: neither have I ever heard. It was about nine o'clock in the evening of the murder—that is to say, the evening before last—when I took up Miss Walters' supper to her chamber. I placed the tray upon the table—wished her good-night—and quitted the room. I locked the door outside, in obedience to strict orders which I had received from Mrs. Lindley. At a quarter to eleven Mrs. Lindley told me and my fellow-servant that we might go up to-bed, but that she intended to sit up a little longer. We bade her good night and left her in the parlour. That was the last time I saw her alive. It was about twenty minutes past eleven, when I and my fellow-servant, who slept in the same room together, were alarmed by a sudden noise as if something was rushing wildly up the stairs from the bottom of the house to the top. We opened the door and heard the cat mewing and crying in a fearful manner: and an idea struck us that something was wrong. So we descended the stairs together—and as we passed Caroline Walters' room, we saw that the door was standing wide open. We did not stop to examine how it had been opened—but continued our way down stairs, when we met Miss Walters rushing away from the parlour as if she was mad. On seeing us, she uttered a dreadful scream and fainted. My fellow-servant remained with her, while I went into the parlour; and there I found my poor 'missus' murdered and weltering in her blood. I raised an alarm—constables came—and Caroline Walters was given into custody."

The fellow-servant of this witness corroborated all the above details; and the surgeon who had attended Caroline at the period of her miscarriage, deposed to the irritability and dislike which the prisoner had manifested on that occasion towards Mrs. Lindley. The same surgeon had examined the body of the murdered woman; and he declared that the fatal blow had been inflicted by a sharp dagger which had penetrated the heart in such a manner that death must have been instantaneous and most probably unaccompanied by even a moan.

We must here observe that Counsellor Sharply cross-examined each of the witnesses with all the skill and tact for which the learned gentleman was so celebrated: but he failed to shake their testimony in any detail.

Mr. Peter Grumley now directed his man Mobbs to enter the witness-box; and that worthy deposed to the following effect:—

"I went over to Fore Street yesterday morning soon arter daybreak, in consequence of orders which I received from my superior,"—and here Mobbs jerked his left-hand thumb over his shoulder towards Grumley. "At the house in Fore Street," he continued, "I examined the chamber which had been occupied by the prisoner Miss Walters; and I found that the door had been opened by the removal of the lock. In fact the lock, which was inside the door, had been unscrewed and took off as clean as anythink. A knife had evidently been used as a turn-screw."

"This case," said the magistrate, as Mobbs stood down from the witness-box, "should have been heard yesterday: but it stood over until to-day in order to enable the officers to collect all the necessary evidence. Is any farther testimony forthcoming?"

"I think, your worship," said Grumley, "that you've heerd quite enough to induce your worship to commit this young gal to take her trial at the sessions."

"Have you anything to urge in behalf of your client, Mr. Sharply?" inquired the magistrate.

"I shall reserve the defence, your worship, until a future occasion," was the learned gentleman's answer.

"Then have you aught to advance, Caroline Walters," demanded the justice of the peace, "wherefore you should not be committed to take your trial on the charge of murder?"

The young girl glanced rapidly towards Grumley; and the equally vivid look of encouragement which she received from him at once dissipated any suspicions which she might have entertained relative to his sincerity when she saw how strongly and indeed overwhelmingly he had marshalled his array of evidence against her.

"I wish to speak a few words, may it please your worship," she said, in a firm tone: then, regardless of an impatient ejaculation which broke from Counsellor Sharply, who naturally feared that she was about to crown the damage already done by her imprudence, she cried in a louder and more resolute, but still musically feminine voice, "For I wish to proclaim to your worship and to all present that I am innocent—yes—innocent as an angel of this black iniquity which is imputed to me! And one word more would I speak—only one word," she continued, while a breathless silence pervaded the officials and the audience: "and that is to explain something which I cannot allow to remain another moment in doubt or mystery. You have heard that I was locked up in my chamber at Mrs. Lindley's house? But it was not so much on account of any quarrel which had taken place, as because I had expressed a desire—nay, even a determination to quit the establishment: and Mrs. Lindley had locked up my clothes and my purse in her own parlour, with a view to pre-

der me the more effectually a prisoner beneath her roof. What course, then, did I adopt? I resolved to fly stealthily;—and hence the removal of the lock from the door of my bed-chamber—hence my visit to the parlour in order to break open the cupboard where the midwife had concealed my clothes! The rest can be imagined: for you may easily conceive my horror and alarm when, on entering the parlour, I beheld the ghastly scene which made me fly away with all the speed, trepidation, and anguish of a guilty person."

Caroline Walters paused for a few moments; and the deep silence which reigned in the Court remained unbroken.

"But I have declared that I am innocent—and I can prove the truth of my averment!" she suddenly exclaimed, the strong emphasis of her words and the abruptness of her manner producing a strange excitement throughout the audience. "Yes—give me the opportunity—and I will undertake to prove my innocence within an hour!"

"And what opportunity do you require?" asked the magistrate.

"I demand permission to visit the house where the murder was committed," returned Caroline; "and to the constable who may take charge of me thither, will I show such unmistakable evidences that the deed must have been committed by another, that your worship will order me to be discharged at once."

"Can you not sufficiently instruct a constable that he may proceed to the house and obtain the testimony to which you allude?" asked the magistrate.

"No, your worship," replied the young girl, in a resolute tone: "it is absolutely necessary that I should go thither myself."

The magistrate appeared puzzled; and he consulted in whispers with his clerk for a few minutes. At length he turned towards the head constable, saying aloud, "Well, Mr. Grumley, what do you think of this singular application on the part of the prisoner?"

"It isn't for me to express an opinion in your worship's presence," responded the constable, in a deferential manner: "but if your worship chooses to order a remand until to-morrow morning, I shan't offer no sort of objection."

"And in the meantime you will take the young woman to the house in Fore Street?" said the magistrate, in a tone of half-inquiry and half-command.

"Your worship's instructions shall be attended to," answered Grumley, dexterously throwing upon the magistrate all the responsibility of the proposed step, though actually encouraging it by his observations.

"Then let the case stand remanded until to-morrow at eleven o'clock," exclaimed the magistrate, rising from his desk.

"Clear the Court!" bawled the usher;—and while the spectators poured out of one door, Caroline Walters was conducted through another by Grumley and Mobbs into an adjacent room, where refreshments were set before her.

"You have played your part uncommon well, young Miss," said Grumley; "although you did do a little more in the palavering line than I had recommended. But howsomever, we've gained our pint—and that's the principal. It's now six o'clock," he added, after consulting the huge silver watch which he drew from his fob. "Lord how time does slip away in them Courts, to be sure! But we'll stay here until about half-past eight—under pretence of letting the crowd disperse aforehand: and then we'll slip quietly off, all three of us, to Fore Street. I say, Mobbs old feller—what time is the boat to be in readiness?"

"At a quarter to nine punctiwal," was the response.

"The boat?" exclaimed Caroline Walters. "Is that intended for my escape? If so, whither do you mean to send me?" she demanded, a vague terror coming over her.

"Don't be alarmed, Miss," said Grumley, in a reassuring tone. "A boat certainly enters into our plans as a item of the arrangements: but it will be at your orders, to land you where you like. And now don't ask no more questions at present—but eat some grub and make your mind easy. Come, Mobbs, you and me will just tool a pipe and dip our beaks into this here jug of his worship's ale, until it's time to be jogging."

The two constables accordingly seated themselves near the fire which burnt in the grate; and while they smoked their pipes, Caroline Walters fell into a deep reverie upon the past, the present, and the future.

CHAPTER CXXX.

THE REVISIT TO THE MIDWIFE'S HOUSE.

It was just as the clock at the Archbishop's palace in Lambeth was chiming half-past eight, that Mr. Peter Grumley and his man Mobbs led Caroline Walters forth from the back door of the magistrate's dwelling.

The young girl had neither bonnet nor shawl—for those who had hurried her off to prison so peremptorily on the night of the murder, had not manifested the consideration or the forethought to provide her with any additional garment to her own clothing;—and thus she had nothing but her ordinary apparel to protect her against the night-air.

Neither Grumley nor Mobbs now took any notice of this circumstance until they had proceeded some short distance from the dwelling of the justice of the peace: and then, suddenly perceiving that the young girl was shivering with the cold and that her teeth were chattering violently, as she walked between himself and his companion, Grumley exclaimed, "By goles! this is too bad—the poor creatur' is well nigh starved!"

"Why didn't she eat the bread and cheese that his worship ordered to be given her?" growled Mobbs—for Caroline had refused to partake of any refreshment at the magistrate's abode.

"I don't mean that kind of starwation, you cussed fool," exclaimed Mr. Grumley. "I mean she's starved with cold."

"Oh! never mind—never mind," said the young girl, crossing her arms over her bosom. "We shall soon be there—and then I can procure some warmer apparel——"

"Well, come along, then," observed Grumley, quickening his pace: and making Caroline take his arm, he led her along at a rate which soon imparted a healthier circulation to her blood.

In ten minutes they reached Fore Street; and the door of the well known house was opened b,

one of the servants who had borne evidence against Caroline at the examination.

"Ah! and so you are come here—to the house which you have made one of mourning, Miss," said the menial in a bitter tone, the instant that the light which she held in her hand threw its rays upon the countenance of Caroline.

"Silence, woman—I am innocent!" ejaculated the young girl, in a tone which made the servant feel that it might really be the truth which was thus solemnly and emphatically averred.

"Yes—silence, and let's do our work without bickering or ill-words," said Mr. Grumley. "Come now, shut the front door—that's right. Which room is it that you want to go to, Miss?" he demanded, addressing the question to Caroline Walters.

"Say your own," whispered Mobbs in her ear—the servant not catching the hint thus hastily conveyed.

"My own," accordingly exclaimed Caroline: "and I wish to be alone with the constables," she added, of her own accord.

"Good," whispered Mobbs.

"Well, then—come along," said Mr. Grumley. "Here, young 'ooman, lend us your candle," he added, as he took the light from the servant's hand. "Which is the parlour where the old lady is laid out?"

"In there," answered Mobbs, pointing to the door opening from the passage, where this conversation took place. "But I don't suppose you want to see her?"

"Not I indeed," responded Grumley. "Come, Miss Walters, you lead the way, if you please—and me and my man will foller."

Caroline accordingly ascended the stairs which appeared to creak ominously beneath her feet and those of the two men behind her; and the atmosphere of the house seemed laded with that thick, fetid, nauseating smell which so frequently denotes

the presence of a corpse. It even appeared that the very walls felt clammy as her hands touched them while she was thus ascending the staircase.

And all was silent throughout the dwelling,—all save the sounds of the footsteps of the young girl and the two constables: for the females who were lodging in the establishment at the time of the murder had sought other asylums the very morning after the terrible catastrophe.

In a few minutes Caroline Walters reached the chamber which had so lately been her own; and the two constables followed her into the room, Mobbs closing the door behind him.

"Now what is to be done?" demanded Caroline, goaded by suspense to a pitch of intolerable impatience respecting the ruse and the escape which had been promised her.

"Don't be afeard, Miss," said Grumley: "all will be right in a moment. Look out, Mobbs!"

And Mobbs, noiselessly opening the window, thrust his head forth.

The night was very dark, and the Thames gurgled as its full tide swept rapidly on beneath that open casement.

A vague terror once more came upon Caroline Walters; and her anxious looks wandered rapidly from Mobbs who was still leaning out of the window, to Peter Grumley who was standing in the middle of the chamber with the candle in his hand.

"It's all right," observed Mobbs, suddenly drawing in his head and turning away from the window. "The boat is about ten or a dozen yards distance."

"The boat again!" ejaculated Caroline, and she threw a terrified glance at the open casement.

"Now, young lady," said Grumley, suddenly speaking in a rough and almost stern tone, "the moment for your escape is come. Decide now what you have done already, and what you might still go to do? You have lured me and my partner here on pretence of examining some proof of your innocence; and while he, and me in looking another way, you opens that window softly but speedily, and you jumps clean out into the Thames!"

"O horror!" exclaimed Caroline, clasping her hands entreatingly: "would you murder me?"

"Don't be silly, gal," said Grumley in a tone which instantly recalled her to herself. "Well—you jumps out, I was observing—and me and Mobbs haven't time to save you. To-morrow all London will believe that you preferred suicide by drowning to death on the scaffold by the hand of Jack Ketch. But no one, save and except just them few as is concerned in the business, will suspect that there was a boat a-waiting in readiness close underneath this window—and that the people in the said boat picked you up and rowed away with you in a jiffey. Neither will it be imagined that in this self-same boat there was a disguise—not only in the shape of garments, but also for staining the complexion——"

"Ah! now I understand you, Mr. Grumley—and I thank you—my God! I thank you most sincerely!" exclaimed Caroline, taking the constable's hand and pressing it as warmly and as fervently as if she had just found a father in that man.

"Well, well, Miss—I hope you'll be happy—and that you'll take care and not be caught—that's all!" said the head constable. "But, by the bye, here's the fifty guineas which Mrs. Bonse sent you——"

"Keep them for yourself," said Caroline, gently repulsing the bag which the officer endeavoured to force upon her.

"No—not I, Miss—thank'ee all the same," he said. "I'm both just and honest after my own fashion—and I'm well paid for all this business——"

"Not for worlds would I receive that money—since it comes from Mrs. Bruce!" exclaimed Caroline, in a tone which was decisive. "And now—farewell——"

"Farewell—and good luck to you, Miss!" said Grumley, while Mobbs echoed the sentiment.

Then Caroline Walters approached the window and threw a piercing, penetrating glance into the deep obscurity which hung like a mist upon the river But she caught a glimpse of the boat—she could even see the upturned countenance of some one watching the casement;—and, confident that it was all as Grumley had assured her, she [illegible] the window-sill—then, holding her handkerchief tightly compressed, as if to prevent any ejaculation that might [illegible] her tongue, she sprang courageously forth.

There was a tremendous splash—and [illegible] was followed by the sounds of oars: but Grumley and Mobbs waited to hear no more—and flinging open the door, they rushed from the room, exclaiming in voices which simulated extreme terror the words,—"She has drowned herself! she has drowned herself!"

CHAPTER CXXXI.

BELLENDEN PRIORY.

We must now climb the space of almost seven years in order to introduce our readers to that mansion where, as George Woodhill so confidently predicted, Rose Foster experienced a cordial welcome and immediately found a home.

At the period of which we are writing, Bellenden Priory was one of the most remarkable features of interest at the West End of the metropolis,—not only in an architectural point of view, but likewise on account of its great antiquity. It stood a little way retired from the western side of the Edgeware Road, from which thoroughfare the garden was separated and indeed concealed by a high wall fronted with flint-stones. In the middle of this rude and rugged boundary there was a Gothic portico containing a massive gate studded with large nails; and a bell-pull of thick iron wire, with a deer's foot for a handle, appeared on one side of this solemn-looking entrance.

Within the boundary there was a large garden laid out in so tasteful a manner as to afford a striking relief with its modern characteristics to the mediæval style of the spacious building which stood in the midst; and on a small piece of water, surrounded by picturesque grottoes, a couple of stately swans and several aquatic birds from foreign climes floated about.

The Priory itself was a large, rambling edifice—exhibiting in its different parts various kinds of architecture, according to the ages in which additions had been made to the structure. The front was comparatively modern—three storeys high, and with tall but narrow casements, each one opening on a stone balcony filled with evergreen plants. The

edifice consisted of seven sliding-doors standing beneath a portico, which was reached by an ascent of a dozen steps; and the marble hall within was surrounded by suits of armour and marble statues. The parapet of the façade was battlemented; and at each angle there was a low spire of shine-work.

This frontage looked towards the Edgeware Road: but the southern side of the Priory was the most ancient and had preserved its monastic appearance, with its massive walls, long and deeply-set windows, low doors, and high-pointed roofs. The northern side was only two storeys high and was somewhat in the Elizabethan style of architecture; and the western portion of the Priory was a confused jumble of old towers and wooden out-houses—a portion of a cloister and a spacious stabling.

Such a large, rambling, and ill-connected edifice had necessarily several doors opening into the grounds, and likewise many passages and entrances within. But the interior was very handsomely fitted-up; and all the rooms in the front part of the building were furnished in a modern style as good taste could possibly render consistent with the architectural peculiarities of windows, corridors, chimney-pieces, and recesses. Thus the Priory was a mansion where elegance and splendour combined to ensure the existence of every comfort and luxury, without completely destroying the effect produced upon the eye and the imagination by the solemn grandeur of the structure itself.

Such was Belleaden Priory, the foundation stone of which was said to have been laid in the reign of Richard I, — that well-meaning but mistaken fanatic who was the cause of millions of lives being lost on the plains of Palestine. From the earliest date of its existence, the Priory had belonged to the Bellenden family, which was even more ancient still: for the genealogical tree traced its descent from one of the Norman ruffians who came over with William the Conqueror. But although the Priory had remained for so many centuries in the hands of the Bellendens, an intermarriage with the equally ancient family of Montgomery had by some means or other given rise to litigation respecting the ownership of the mansion and the annexed estate; and these law-suits had commenced about thirty years previously to the date of our tale. There were likewise estates in Warwickshire which had belonged to the Bellendens from generation to generation; but which were even more particularly involved than the Priory property, on account of the claims of the Montgomery family. Touching these matters, however, we shall have to treat more in detail hereafter: for the present we must speak of the Marchioness of Bellenden, the present owner of the Priory.

This lady was now in her thirty-seventh year, and was admired for her beauty, her accomplishments, and her benevolence. A glance at her early history is necessary for the purposes of our tale. She belonged to the Montgomery family, and becoming an orphan at a tender age, was left to the care of an aunt, who, being a maiden lady and having a fortune, resolved to ensure her niece a brilliant position by means of a "good marriage." Thus, scarcely had she attained her seventeenth year, when the innocent, artless, and beautiful Laura was commanded to receive the addresses of the Marquis of Bellenden—an old man in his sixty-second winter! Then there was a sad and even terrible scene between the orphan Laura and her aunt the Dowager-Countess Montgomery: and although there were no witnesses to that scene, it was nevertheless rumoured at the time that Laura had thrown herself at her aunt's feet and had confessed that her affections were already engaged. But whatever were the reasons that Laura urged against the marriage proposed on her behalf, certain it is that the Dowager-Countess Montgomery was inexorable; and it was represented to the unhappy Laura that family reasons required the tremendous sacrifice at her hands, inasmuch as the litigation which had then been in progress about ten years would be amicably settled by this second intermarriage of the two families. In short, Laura was dragged as it were to the altar; and the young creature of seventeen became the wife of the old nobleman of sixty-two! The honeymoon (such a honeymoon as it must have been!) was passed at the Bellenden estate in Warwickshire; and then the Marquis brought home his bride to the Priory. But he did not long survive this most unequal of unions to which he had forced his youthful victim; and his death took place with a suddenness which seemed to savour of a just retribution for his cruelty in blighting all the best and purest affections of her young heart. The family physician pronounced his death to have arisen from apoplexy; and the remains of the last lord of Bellenden were removed with grand funereal pomp into Warwickshire, to be interred in the family vault at the old church where all his ancestors had been laid in due succession.

The death of the Marquis of Bellenden without male issue instantaneously revived the law-suits respecting the heritage of the estates. The Marchioness however kept possession; and her opponents were the male members of the Montgomery family from which she herself was sprung. Vainly did her aunt, the Dowager-Countess, endeavour to induce her niece to come to an amicable settlement: the young widow was resolute in her refusal—for she felt that she had been basely sacrificed in the most important event of a woman's life, and she would therefore show no favour to those who had thus made her the victim of a selfishness which did not however obtain its ends. Time passed on—years rolled by—and the law-suit dragged its slow length along in that tremendous tribunal of Modern Inquisition—the Court of Chancery. The Dowager-Countess Montgomery soon grew wearied of making overtures to her niece, or else was too proud to reiterate them;—and thus at the period when we introduce the Marchioness of Bellenden to our readers, she had been a widow twenty years—she was still in possession of the Priory and the Warwickshire estates—the old Dowager was still alive—and the lawsuit appeared as far off from a settlement as ever.

Yes—the Marchioness of Bellenden was now thirty-seven; and never once during her long widowhood of twenty years had she laid aside her mourning apparel. The tenacity with which she clung to it was most singular—most remarkable—most unaccountable. That she thus permanently regretted the sexagenarian who had been her husband for a few months, she herself did not for a moment pretend: in fact, as she had never loved him, and had been chained to him against her inclination and despite of her most fervent prayers

to the contrary, she could not possibly have ever regretted him at all. Nor did any measure of respect for his memory furnish a hypothesis to solve the mystery of this perseverance in maintaining the weeds of a widow; and therefore was the circumstance evidently a secret belonging to herself —and to herself alone!

Wealthy, handsome, highly accomplished, and of a reputation unsullied by even the slightest breath of scandal, the Marchioness of Bellenden had as a matter of course received many offers of marriage during her long widowhood: but she had refused them each and all, though some were of a nature so eligible as to have appeared beyond the possibility of experiencing a negative. And on those occasions, when thus pressed for a decision in so delicate and important a matter as an invitation to change her condition once more, she would glance significantly but not hypocritically down at her mourning garb, and observe with a singular and almost martyrised air of resolution that she had determined to carry those weeds throughout her earthly career, unto the threshold of the grave itself!

In personal appearance the Marchioness of Bellenden was a woman who could not fail to create a feeling of interest even in the mind of the most callous observer of the female sex. She was tall—well-formed — slightly inclining to *embonpoint* — but characterised by so much elegance and grace that every attitude and every movement had its own peculiar charm. Her bust was of full and voluptuous proportions: the slope of her shoulders was admirable;—and her arms, though robust, were exquisitely symmetrical and dazzlingly white. But the high corsage and the long sleeves veiled the superb neck and the polished arms: yet the beauty of the throat and the faultless formation of the snowy hands, aided also by the shape which the black dress took from the rich contours of the bosom, allowed ample scope for the exercise of delicious imaginings in respect to the charms thus modestly concealed.

The countenance of the Marchioness of Bellenden was very handsome; and its beauty was so well preserved that, despite even of the widow's weeds which certainly have a tendency to mar the appearance of youthfulness, she did not seem to be more than thirty. Her eyes were large and of a soft liquid blue: her hair, which she wore in bands and did not permit the close-fitting cap altogether to conceal, was of a dark chesnut—not particularly luxuriant, but with a gloss shining on its surface as the lustre of a lamp displays the richness of velvet;—her teeth were white as ivory and faultlessly even;—and there was a vermilion freshness upon the lips which must inevitably have made the admirer of the sex think within himself how great was the pity if no tender kisses were ever more to be gathered there!

The manners of the Marchioness of Bellenden were not too elegant to be cordial nor too fashionably refined to be winning: elegant and refined they assuredly were—but not with that glacial formality, chilling reserve, and ceremonial haughtiness which seems to calculate the distance between individuals with a view to decide what amount of civility may be vouchsafed or how much cold constraint is to be assumed. No—Lady Bellenden knew full well how to manifest that graceful condescension which made her inferiors feel at their ease in her presence; while to her equals she exhibited an affability and amiability which, though always as it were showing through a certain settled melancholy alike of expression and manner, nevertheless endeared her to all her friends and acquaintances.

Such was the Marchioness of Bellenden — the lady to whose care George Woodfall introduced the orphan Rose Foster!

And, as he had foretold, cordial—most cordial was the welcome which the much-persecuted girl experienced at the hands of the benevolent lady. An elegant chamber was assigned to Rose on the southern side of the Priory; and when she awoke on the following morning a milliner with a quantity of ready-made apparel was introduced into her presence. New and excellent raiment for the orphan's immediate use was thus provided; and the dress-maker had the orders of the Marchioness to take Miss Foster's commands for the completion of everything that was necessary for her toilette.

In the afternoon George Woodfall called at the Priory to pay his respects to the Marchioness and inquire concerning the health of Rose;—and her ladyship insisted that he should stay to dinner. Thus at the time that poor Caroline Walters was undergoing the examination before the Lambeth magistrate, Rose Foster was conversing with the Marchioness and the young artist in one of the elegantly-furnished parlours of Bellenden Priory.

CHAPTER CXXXII.

THE AMOROUS CONSTABLE.

The clocks at the West End were striking eleven when Mr. Peter Grumley and his man Mobbs stopped at the door of Mrs. Brace's establishment in Pall Mall.

"Now I shall say good night to you, old feller," observed the head constable to his factotum: "'cause I promised to call and let Mrs. Brace know that the young gal had succeeded in escaping. And besides," added Mr. Grumley, lowering his voice to a significant whisper, "she's a uncommon pleasant lady, is Mrs. Brace—and I shan't mind a spending half-an-hour or so with her."

"Well, I wish you luck, Mr. Grumley," said Mobbs. "We shall meet in the mornin' at the Office. Good night, sir."

"Good night," repeated Grumley, as he knocked at Mrs. Brace's door, while Mobbs hurried away to his own abode.

The summons of the head constable was almost immediately answered by the discreet lady's-maid Harriet; and he was forthwith ushered into the parlour where the milliner was anxiously awaiting his arrival.

Harriet withdrew; and the moment the door closed behind her, Mrs. Brace demanded in a quick tone, "What news?—have you succeeded?"

"Everythink as right as a trivet, ma'am," was the prompt reply: for Mr. Grumley saw that the lady was labouring under considerable suspense.

"Caroline is at liberty?" she exclaimed.

"As free as you and me, ma'am," rejoined the head constable; "and as safe too, if so be she has made proper use of the disguise which was provided for her."

"Which she has no doubt done," observed Mrs.

Brace, from whose mind a tremendous weight had been suddenly taken by the welcome intelligence received from the constable. "But pray be seated —and help yourself to whatever you fancy," she observed, pointing towards a chair and glancing at the table on which there were decanters of wine and the spirit-stand.

"Thank'ee, ma'am," said Grumley: "and with your permission I'll mix myself a glass of hot brandy-and-water just to take the chill out of my stomach."

"Do so," returned Mrs. Brace; and tell me all that has occurred to-day."

"The thing has been managed as nice as possible," said Mr. Grumley, after having taken two or three experimental sips at the grog which he had just brewed; and smacking his lips in unalloyed approval of the beverage, he continued thus: —"I all along knowed the evidence was so dead against her that it would be impossible to get her off by fair means; and I told you as much yesterday evening at Bow Street. So I had a plan cut and dried to save her by stratagem. In short, I resolved that she should ask the magistrate to let her visit the house in Fore Street for the purpose of procuring testimony to prove her innocence; and when once there, I was determined that she should either jump out of the winder of her own accord—or else I meant to put her out."

"Good God!" ejaculated the milliner, trembling all over and gasping for breath: "you do not mean to say—that is—you would not have me believe that —that you—murdered her?"

"There wasn't no necessity for *that*, ma'am," answered Grumley. "The winder, as p'raps you know, looks on the Thames—and my plan was to have a boat in readiness to pick the young gal up—and a disguise in the boat for her to assume without delay."

"And was this extraordinary plan realized?" demanded Mrs. Brace, shuddering as she fancied she beheld the unfortunate girl Caroline Walters struggling in the waters of the rapid stream.

"Realized—and with triumphant success, as they say upon the play-bills," answered Grumley. "Miss Walters jumped out as courageous as a diver and as light as a cat—and the boat picked her up in a moment. Then me and my man Mobbs rushed out of the room—raised an alarm—and pretended to be quite distracted at the hawful occurrence. We got a wherry as soon as we could—made the boatmen pull us up and down along the shore—but of course couldn't discover any trace of the young lady; and so we pretended to give up the search in despair."

"And the impression will be that she was drowned?" said Mrs. Brace, interrogatively.

"Just so, my dear madam," replied Grumley, throwing an amorous look on the milliner as he drank his brandy-and-water. "The newspapers will have a long and pathetic account of the business; and in fact it all looks natural enow. A young gal driven to desperation—sees that she is sure to be committed for trial—if committed, knows that she will be found guilty—if found guilty, is well convinced that she'll be hung; and so to prevent all these unpleasantnesses, hits upon the ingenious trick of getting herself taken to Fore Street, where she 's well aware that the means of suicide is within her reach—'cause why, the river rolls under the winder. There it is all in a nut-shell—and a wery pathetic, romantic, and affecting history it makes."

"But will you not be compromised?" asked Mrs. Brace.

"Not a atom," returned Grumley, with a sly laugh: "I took all my measures too well to leave the door open for any suspicion against me. When I went to fetch the young gal away from the prison a little before one to-day, I remarked to the turnkey in a careless, off-hand way that she was sure to be committed, as I had got up a precious strong case against her. So *he* wouldn't think that I was at all friendly disposed towards her. Then I really did produce an overwhelming force of testimony against her; and I myself was the fust to ask the magistrate to commit her, before he himself or his clerk had uttered an opinion on the subject. Again, when Miss Walters requested permission to visit the house in Fore Street, I wouldn't appear to help her at all in the matter: on the contrary, I managed to throw all the responsibility of the proceedings on the justice of the peace himself. In short, I played my cards so well, ma'am, that I can't possibly be blamed."

"Not for allowing her to escape from your custody?" said Mrs. Brace.

"To be sure not!" ejaculated Grumley. "Suppose, now, that me and my man Mobbs had let her run away from us while we were taking her to the house in Fore Street—*then* indeed the world might have said that we were either bribed or that we showed a most unpardonable negligence. But when once we got the girl in safety into the house, who could have supposed that she would suddenly open a casement and flings herself into the Thames below? Don't you see the difference, ma'am?"—and as Mr. Grumley asked this question, he winked his eye knowingly.

"I now comprehend the full meaning and force of your precaution," observed the milliner. "And during the examination before the magistrate, was anything said at all calculated to compromise——"

"You or your establishment, ma'am?" exclaimed Grumley, who, perceiving that the lady hesitated, finished the sentence for her. "Not a word—not a syllable, I can assure you. In fact, *I* put a stop to all that, my dear madam, when I was taking the young gal along to the magistrate's house."

"Ah! then she did threaten?" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, inquiringly: for she was anxious to learn how far the revelations of Caroline Walters might have extended.

"Well—she did threaten a many things, ma'am," said Mr. Grumley, surveying the milliner with looks so full of unmistakable grossness that she began to be not only disgusted but likewise alarmed. "It ain't however of no use vexing yourself on that account, my dear creatur'," added the constable.

"Oh! no—not at all," ejaculated Mrs. Brace. "But I will now hand you over the remaining moiety of the promised reward," she observed, starting from her seat.

And as she crossed the room to open the writing-desk which stood on a side-table, Mr. Grumley followed her with his eyes; and the rustling of her silk dress—the glimpse which he caught of her robust but well-turned ankles and her very genteelly shaped feet—the gleaming of her white neck and arms in the lamp-light—and the coquettish French cap so admirably becoming the milliner's style of beauty,—all these produced an indescribable

effect upon Mr. Grumley's emotions — and his blood, inflamed alike by lust and potent liquor, appeared to boil in his veins.

The milliner took from her writing-desk a number of Bank-notes; and when she returned to her seat, she was more profoundly struck and more seriously alarmed than at first by the singular expression of countenance with which Mr. Grumley regarded her: and although she was well experienced in all the looks and glances which constitute an index to the strong, fiery, or libidinous passions of the soul, yet her pride would scarcely permit her to believe that the coarse, vulgar, ill-favoured, and sordidly-apparelled police-constable could possibly aspire to any tender concession on her part.

"Here is your money, Mr. Grumley," she said, affecting a pleasant but patronising smile: then, the more firmly to impress upon his mind the fact that she regarded him as an inferior whom she was paying for his hireling services, she observed, "You have really well earned the amount—and I have every reason to be satisfied with your conduct. I could not possibly have employed a better agent in the matter."

"I'm glad you're satisfied, my dear creatur'," returned the constable, squeezing her hand as he took the Bank-notes which she gave him, and accompanying that evidence of his admiration by a look of amorous grossness.

Mrs. Brace drew back her hand rapidly, and assumed so severe an expression of countenance that Mr. Peter Grumley could not help observing that she was offended: but he only laughed—and then proceeded to count the Bank-notes with a business-like deliberation.

"Right as a trivet," he exclaimed when this methodical task was accomplished: and securing the money about his person, he fixed his eyes long and earnestly on the milliner's countenance. "You're a very handsome woman—a very handsome woman," he repeated; "and I don't know when I've been so much excited by any lady's personal appearance. In fact, I feel all over no-how, ma'am—and that's God's truth."

"Mr. Grumley, I am surprised at you," said the milliner, her cheeks becoming scarlet. "But you cannot mean anything save a joke," she exclaimed, instantaneously recovering her presence of mind and forcing herself to smile.

"By goles! I never was less inclined to joke in all my life, my dear creatur'," cried Mr. Grumley. "There seems to be a very devil in my heart and hell-fire in my blood, prompting me to do anythink desperate, so as——"

"What do you mean, sir?" exclaimed the milliner, starting from her seat in alarm: for the eyes of the constable appeared to devour her with their looks of burning lust.

"I mean, my dear beautiful creatur'," said Grumley, also quitting his chair and extending his arms towards her,—"that I *must* and *will* have a kiss—even if I die for it!"

And before Mrs. Brace could offer any resistance or even give utterance to a word of remonstrance, she was locked in the rude embrace of the herculean constable, and his coarse mouth was fastened to her own luscious lips.

"Now will you leave me?" she said in a rapid and excited tone, as he at length relinquished his hold upon her: and, trembling all over with rage and with a countenance that showed its deadly pallor even through the soft tint of rouge that was wont to render her cheeks so captivating with its roseate bloom, she clung to the mantel-piece for support.

"Leave you!—no—by heavens, I won't leave you till to-morrow morning!" exclaimed Grumley, maddened with the contact of the milliner's lips, the sweets of which he had just enjoyed, and longing once more to feel the warm pressure of her glowing bosom against his chest.

"This is an insolence — unsupportable — intolerable!" gasped Mrs. Brace, her eyes actually becoming haggard with mingled alarm and horror as she read upon the countenance of the officer all the ferocity of those passions which were raging in his soul: then all on a sudden she extended her hand with frantic desperation towards the bell-pull.

But Grumley, anticipating the movement, once more caught her in his arms; and, in spite of her desperate struggles — for she feared to alarm the whole house by shrieking for help — he succeeded in imprinting a dozen kisses upon her lips that were now parched with rage, and on her cheeks that were burning from the same emotion.

Almost annihilated by the intolerable disgust arising from these odious caresses, and by the terrible apprehensions which the rabid lasciviousness of the monster's manner and looks excited in her brain, the milliner sank, breathless and exhausted upon a seat.

"Now, listen to me," said the constable, speaking with the hot breath and parched tongue of a brutal lust. "I've taken a fancy to you—and I'm determined to gratify my whim. I know you ain't over particular yourself—and I also know that a strange man's sleeping in your house won't be any unusual thing. So, let us have no palaver——"

"Ah!" ejaculated the miserable Mrs. Brace, her tongue unlocking through the very poignancy of her despair: "that ungrateful Caroline Walters has vilified me and my establishment—I see it all!"

"Well, she did tell me a few plain truths, my dear creatur'," observed Grumley: "but not more than I had guessed beforehand. For the instant that you made me go with you to the Prince, and when I found that his Royal Highness was so very much interested in you, and so anxious that these young gals should be got off,—oh! oh! thought I to myself——"

"Enough! enough" cried Mrs. Brace in a tone of almost abject entreaty. "Tell me what sum of money you *now* require to induce you to leave me at once."

"Lord bless your dear heart," returned Mr. Grumley, "what a mercenary son of a gun you must take me to be! But I should be ashamed to receive another suverin at your hands—whereas I *do* mean to help myself to no end of kisses."

"Dare not approach me again—or I will alarm the house!" said Mrs. Brace, in a hoarse, thick, and rapid tone, while her hands were clenched until the nails of her fingers almost penetrated the plump white flesh.

"My dear angel, a chap as is accustomed to grapple with thieves and the most desperatest waggabones, isn't likely to be afeard of a pretty woman's anger," said Grumley. "So let us have no more nonsense—it's only delaying pleasure—and my resolution's fixed to pass the night with you——"

"Good God! is it possible!" moaned Mrs. Brace, sinking back in her chair.

But no another word was spoken, the door opened hastily—and Harriet the lady's-maid entered the room.

"What is the matter?" demanded the milliner, instantaneously recalled to herself by the sudden and almost precipitate appearance of her faithful abigail.

"A person wishes to see you, ma'am—nay, insists upon forcing herself into your presence," replied Harriet. "She will take no refusal——"

"But who is she?" asked Mrs. Brace, relieved from the first dreadful fear that it was her husband who thus demanded an audience.

"That woman, you know, ma'am—who came here one morning and sent up a letter—when you were engaged with Lord Florimel, ma'am—you remember," added the lady's-maid, speaking with hesitation on account of Grumley.

"Here I am to answer for myself!" said a voice just outside the door: and immediately afterwards a young woman, dressed with great plainness, entered the room.

"The Gallows' Widow, by gosh!" exclaimed Grumley, springing towards her.

An ejaculation of mingled surprise and terror burst from the lips of Elizabeth Marks—for she it indeed was: and she made a desperate effort to break from the grasp which the constable had fixed upon her.

But wrenching round her arm with a violence that made her sink almost upon her knees, he said in a savage tone, "Be quiet—or I'll do you a mischief!"

And the woman, completely overpowered, attempted no farther resistance.

CHAPTER CXXXIII.

A COMPROMISE.

Mrs. Brace had not failed to recognise Elizabeth Marks the instant her looks fell upon the pale but far from ill-favoured countenance of that woman whom she knew to be her husband's mistress. And here we should observe that the Gallows' Widow was not attired in her wonted apparel of mourning weeds: for she had laid aside that too distinctive dress ever since she became notoriously implicated in the affair of Joe Warren's escape from Newgate. Nevertheless, it was easy to recognise her, now that the dark veil which she wore to conceal her countenance was lifted from those pale features;—and thus a mortal terror was carried to the soul of Mrs. Brace at the very same instant that Peter Grumley pounced upon the Gallows' Widow and made her his prisoner.

For the milliner now perceived, at a glance, all the variety and menacing nature of those difficulties which had suddenly sprung up around her. Elizabeth Marks knew that her real name was *Warren*, and that she was in truth the wife of the redoubtable Magsman; and these facts she might blurt forth in the presence of Grumley. Nay, more—she might even proclaim Mrs. Brace's complicity in the escape of the Magsman from Newgate, and thus the reputation, the honour, and even the personal safety, of the unhappy milliner would be so completely in the power of the Bow Street Officer that she would not dare return a negative to any favour he might ask of a tender nature, or any extortion he might practise in a pecuniary point of view.

Now did Mrs. Grumley fail to observe the singular consternation which seized upon Mrs. Brace the instant her eyes encountered those of the Gallows' Widow;—and even if her husband's momentary confusion on the part of the milliner, he could not have failed from the mere fact of the visit of such a woman as Elizabeth Marks, to draw inferences by no means favourable to her private character.

"Well, this is a most extraordinary interruption to a very pleasant little conversation which you and me, ma'am, was having together," said the Bow Street Officer, winking his eye with a half-ominous and half-malicious significancy at Mrs. Brace.

"Of what offence is this young woman accused?" demanded the milliner, summoning to her aid all her mental courage and firmness.

"Why, we're not exactly accused, ma'am," replied the constable, still retaining his hold upon the prisoner, "that she's long been in connexion with a desperate set of fellows; and there's three or four things I can bring fair and square against her. But I don't want to be too hard upon her—and so I shall only accuse her of having aided and abetted in the escape of one Joe Warren from Newgate——"

"He picks out that offence, ma'am," interrupted the Gallows' Widow, darting a look of mingled hatred and contempt upon the constable,—"because there's a reward of fifty guineas offered for the apprehension of the woman who intimidated and overawed the household of old Shuckmain the picture-dealer, on the night when Joseph Warren performed the feat that has made his name as famous as Jack Sheppard's. And that woman for whom fifty guineas are offered——"

"Is yourself, Lizzy Marks," exclaimed Grumley: "and so you needn't attempt to deny it."

"On the contrary, I glory in it," rejoined the Gallows' Widow. "But take care of yourself, Mr. Grumley: it will prove in the long run an evil day for you when you began to make war upon the band to which I belong."

"We shall see all about that, my dear," observed the constable, in a tone of self-satisfaction. "Come, now—let us be off——"

"Mrs. Brace," exclaimed the Gallows' Widow, "pay this fellow fifty guineas—and he will let me go."

"Not I, indeed!" ejaculated Grumley.

"Yes—but you will, though," returned Elizabeth Marks. "Mrs. Brace—you know that I can speak out about certain things if I like——"

"Silence, woman!" ejaculated the milliner in a tone that was rather hysterically sharp than imperiously prompt. "Mr. Grumley," she immediately said, turning towards the constable, "I should wish to avoid the scandal that will be entailed upon my establishment by the exposure of the fact that this woman was arrested while paying a visit to me: At the same time," added Mrs. Brace, "I would not have you think that I am in any way intimidated——"

"Well, well," exclaimed the constable, perceiving the smile of mingled malice and triumph which already wreathed the lips of the Gallows' Widow,—"I see that it would be unpleasant if the world was to know that Elizabeth Marks, *alias* the Gallows' Widow, was on such familiar terms of intimacy with Mrs. Brace, the fashionable dress-maker of

Pall Mall, that she could introduce herself at all hours into her friend's presence."

The milliner listened in dismay to this speech, which the constable delivered in a measured and significant tone: for it was as much as to intimate that *he*—Peter Grumley—had now indeed got *her*—the fashionable milliner—completely into his power. And Elizabeth Marks, whose natural keenness enabled her to perceive that some compromise was about to be suggested by the Bow Street Officer in her behalf, chuckled with that species of low, inward laugh which invariably sounded ominous and made the blood run cold, no matter on whose ears it fell.

"Yes," resumed Mr. Grumley, after a brief pause during which he watched with satisfaction the effect that his previous speech had produced upon the milliner,—"it *would* be unpleasant for the world to know that the Gallows' Widow was on such intimate terms in Pall Mall; and the magistrate might even think it necessary to send for Mrs. Brace and demand explanations on that point."

"Enough—enough, Mr. Grumley!" ejaculated the wretched milliner. "Name the conditions upon which you will suffer this woman to take her departure."

"And you will comply with 'em?" demanded the officer, interrogatively.

"She will not dare refuse," said the Gallows' Widow, in that quiet tone which actually imparted to the observation more weight and a deeper meaning than if it had been uttered with ejaculatory excitement.

"Speak, sir—be quick—and let us put an end to this scene," said Mrs. Brace, trembling all over and speaking in a voice that was painfully agitated, despite the desperate efforts which she made to preserve her self-possession: but every look which was darted upon her by either Grumley or the Gallows' Widow, and every word which fell from their mouths, carried with a more poignant intensity to the soul of the miserable woman the harrowing conviction that she was utterly and totally in the power of both.

"Madam," observed Elizabeth Marks, again speaking in her quiet manner, "it is very evident from what Mr. Grumley has said that *he* is disposed to assent to a compromise on my behalf—and therefore any delay which arises will be caused only by *you*."

"That's true enough," exclaimed the Bow Street Officer. "And now for the conditions that I have to propose."

"Speak!" ejaculated Mrs. Brace, with a nervous irritability which showed how tensely her feelings were strung.

"In the first place," said Mr. Grumley, "you will pay me, ma'am, the fifty guineas which I lose by letting this young 'ooman escape me?"

"Agreed!" exclaimed the milliner. "What next?"

"And you will consent," rejoined the constable, "to the little favour I was asking you just at the very moment when the servant came into the room to announce the Gallows' Widow."

The lascivious twinkling of Grumley's eyes and the blush of indignation and shame which all in a moment overspread the countenance of Mrs. Brace, revealed to the keen perception and far-sighted experience of Elizabeth Marks the nature of the favour to which allusion had just been made;—and the expression of mingled satire, malicious glee, and subdued astonishment which instantaneously appeared upon the woman's pale features, struck the milliner in her turn, making her aware that the Gallows' Widow had penetrated into the nature of the constable's pretensions.

"My God!" almost screamed forth the wretched milliner, her feelings now goaded to the verge of desperation: "would that I were dead—dead!"

And she repeated the word with a frightful emphasis.

"Compose yourself, madam," said Elizabeth Marks, with characteristic coolness. "You cannot *now* accuse Mr. Grumley of protracting this unpleasant scene."

"Let us put an end to it at once!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, now speaking with the firmness of one who has suddenly taken a desperate resolution. "Mr. Grumley, I agree to the conditions."

"Capital!" ejaculated the officer: and he released the hold which throughout this scene he had retained upon his captive.

"I thank you, madam, for having purchased my freedom," said the Gallows' Widow, but speaking in a tone of quiet and subdued satire instead of gratitude. "The business which brought me here to-night is of no great importance. I merely wanted a little money: but as you have so generously undertaken to pay the fifty guineas to this cormorant constable, I shall not ask you for any more—especially as in your anxiety to serve me, you have agreed to *another* condition which, I see full well, is by no means palatable. However," added Elizabeth Marks, suffering the irony of her tone to become more apparent,—"when the fashionable, exquisite, and elegant milliner of Pall Mall contemptuously designated me as '*that woman*,' she did not foresee how fully and completely she herself was destined to be humiliated in the presence of the very female whom she thus scorned, loathed, and despised. Farewell, madam—and may you pass a pleasant night."

With these words the Gallows' Widow quitted the room, her low chuckling laugh sounding with a species of sepulchral omen upon the ears of Mrs. Brace, who, already crushed and overwhelmed by the withering satire which had been levelled at her, sank half-fainting into the nearest chair.

CHAPTER CXXXIV.

THE GLASS OF LIQUEUR.

TEN minutes had elapsed since the departure of the Gallows' Widow; and a profound silence reigned throughout the milliner's establishment in Pall Mall.

The door of the parlour was now opened cautiously; and Mrs. Brace came forth, holding a light in her hand, and followed by Peter Grumley.

The countenance of the unhappy woman was of a ghastly pallor, which, as before stated, showed through the roseate tint which art had shed upon her cheeks: but in the settled frown stamped on her forehead—the corrugated brows—the fixed stare of the eyes—the compressed lips—and the upheaved, motionless bosom,—there was evinced a sternness of purpose which would have filled the constable's mind with terrible misgivings had not his brain become

confused with a large potation of brandy wherein he had indulged immediately after the departure of the Gallows' Widow. His countenance was therefore flushed—his eyes were blood-shot—and his lips were wreathed into a vacant smile of drunken satisfaction and tipsy triumph,—his appearance thus presenting a remarkable contrast with that of the determined and desperate woman who now conducted him as cautiously as she could up the staircase to her own bed-chamber.

But the carpetted stairs creaked beneath the heavy and uneven steps of the constable, and his bulky form occasionally reeled against the balustrade, thereby producing a cracking sound in the wood-work; and in rapid, low, but severe—nay, almost savage whispers, did Mrs. Brace enjoin him to be careful how he alarmed and aroused the entire household.

At length the chamber was reached—and Mr. Peter Grumley was introduced into that temple of voluptuousness whither the milliner was wont at times to admit her favoured elect.

Throwing himself upon a chair, the constable cast his eyes around the chamber, every feature of which he surveyed with that semi-vacancy which characterises the looks of a man who has taken a drop too much: but when his eyes settled upon the downy bed, with its linen of snowy whiteness and its pillows soft and luxurious even to the view, all the fury of his animal passions rekindled with consuming ardour.

Rising from his seat, he caught the milliner in his arms; and, straining her in his uncouth embrace, he pressed his parched and heated lips to her own. Then, resuming the chair, he forced her to sit upon his knees.

"You are uncommon handsome, my dear," he murmured, in a voice rendered more than naturally thick and hoarse by the desires which were devouring him; "and I knowed you wouldn't play the

cruel when once we came to a good understanding together."

"You seem to be thirsty—your lips are dry—your tongue is parched," said Mrs. Brace, who had thus far abandoned herself to the odious toyings of the constable because it suited her purpose to *appear* thus docile, calm, and resigned.

"Well, I am athirst," he responded, rolling his feverish tongue over his cracking lips.

"I have wine, spirits, and liqueurs in that cupboard," said the milliner, gently disengaging herself from his arms and re-arranging the corsage of her dress.

"You're exceedin' kind, my dear," observed Grumley, fixing upon her his looks of the grossest, most brutal lasciviousness. "Suppose you give me a little wine-and-water fust, to squench this terrible thirst;—and then I'll take a sip of——what d'ye call them last things you spoke of——"

"Liqueurs," responded the milliner, whose manner was glacial and passionless as her tone was cold and meaningless. "Here are curaçoa, noyau, goldan-water, and Dantzic brandy."

"Well, my dear, I leave it all to you to choose me a glass of the best of them stuffs," returned the constable; "for I can't say as how I ever tasted any of them. So let us have the wine-and-water fust—the what-d'ye-call-it next—and then to bed in a jiffey."

Mrs. Brace opened the cupboard and speedily mixed a tumbler of sherry and cold water, which she handed to the constable. She then returned into the cupboard, where she remained for nearly six minutes; and, on accosting Grumley again, she held in her hand a small glass filled with noyau, the almond flavour of which was diffused through the chamber.

"How beautiful that smells!" exclaimed Mr. Grumley, placing upon the table the tumbler which he had emptied and receiving the liqueur-glass from the milliner's plump white hand.

"Noyau always has the prettiest of almonds," she observed; and her lips, whilst they were now milky white, quivered slightly.

"Your health, my love," said the constable, raising his eyes and the glass at the same time. "Come—you may begin to undress yourself," he added with coarse jocularity.

"I am your slave for this night, according to agreement," returned the milliner, taking off her coquettish French cap.

"You look handsomer than ever," exclaimed the constable. "Once more, my love, here's to your health."

And Peter Grumley tossed the noyau down his capacious throat.

But during the instant that elapsed while his countenance was thus upturned and the glass was at his lips, he caught a glimpse of the features of Mrs. Brace—and it struck him that an expression of fiendish malignity and diabolical triumph had suddenly sprung up thereon.

This thought was as rapid as the lightning is vivid; and it was the last which ever flashed through the brain of the Bow Street Officer!

For even as the liqueur was gliding with its luscious smoothness and oily richness down his throat, the glass fell from his hand—a strong spasm shot through his whole frame—and life was already extinct as he toppled for a moment on his chair ere he rolled a heavy corpse upon the carpet!

For nearly a minute did Mrs. Brace stand gazing upon the body of that man whom she had thus sacrificed to her feelings of abhorrence in respect to the present and of terror with regard to the future: for it was not so much to escape his loathsome embraces of this night that she had murdered him, as to save herself from becoming his victim at every hour and at every moment when it might suit his phantasy and please his lustful inclinations thereafter.

Yes—for nearly a minute did she gaze upon the form which was so lately endowed with a robust and vigorous health, and which now lay like a mere bundle of clothes at her feet. No—not exactly like anything so little calculated to inspire emotions of terror: for the ghastly countenance of death—was it not *there*?

Oh! yes—and now an awful consternation began to grow upon the wretched woman—and the clock of St. James's Church suddenly struck *one*; as if to remind her with that solemn sound and at that solemn hour, *that she was alone in her chamber with the corse of her murdered victim!*

Then—oh! then—how bitterly, deeply, profoundly did she repent of the act which she had perpetrated,—not so much on account of the enormity of the crime itself, but because it appeared to have suddenly raised up in her path a thousand embarrassments of a magnitude which she could not see any possibility of surmounting! Oh! better, better far would it have been, she now thought, to surrender herself to the loathsome embraces of the wretch, and to continue every chance and every risk of having to prostitute herself to him in the same way whenever it should suit his caprice and his fancy for the future! Yes—better were it to have become the slave of his beastly lusts and the victim of his odious passions altogether, rather than to have taken the *one* tremendous step which could not be recalled, and which in a moment as it were placed her within view of the black and looming scaffold!

Such were her reflections—but, great heaven! how useless now! For *there*—at her feet—on the carpet of her own bed-chamber, lay the corpse of the murdered man!

For an instant she thought of committing suicide: but her soul sickened at the idea of self-destruction! And yet the means were ready at hand—for there was still left a large dose of Prussic acid in that phial whence she had poured a few drops into the fatal glass of noyau! Yes—the means were ready: the inclination even prompted;—but the courage was wanting to complete all the elements necessary for the appalling tragedy of suicide!

And yet what was to be done? The corpse was *there*—and it must be disposed of. But where could it be concealed?—where buried? And was Mrs. Brace able to adopt any decisive step without assistance? No—it was impossible;—and the wretched woman, seating herself upon a chair, covered her face with her hands and gave way to all the bitterness of her harrowing reflections.

Alone with a corpse!—this was the appalling conviction that was uppermost in her mind. In a few minutes she felt a cold shudder—a glacial tremor—stealing over her;—and it struck her disordered fancy that some terrible phantom had risen slowly and noiselessly up before her and was gazing upon

her with its dull, glassy, lustreless eyes. Then she abruptly removed her hands from her countenance; and her looks, wild with apprehension, were cast swiftly round the room—settling irresistibly at length upon the corpse that lay stretched on the floor.

The murderess started to her feet. Was she the sport of some horrible vision—the victim of some hideous night-mare?—or was it really true that she had killed a human being—and that the corpse was *there—at her feet?* Once more she carried her hands to her head—but it was not this time to cover her face: no—it was to press her fingers to her throbbing brows and thereby steady her thoughts, if possible. For her brain—Oh! it reeled—it reeled;—and those thoughts—Oh! they whirled—they whirled;—and it seemed as if her scalp had been torn off and some demon was pouring molten lead upon the palpitating, seething, quivering cerebral mass! Just heaven! her punishment had already begun on earth—and the red right arm of God was already stretched out to avenge that foul and atrocious murder!

Alone with the corpse of her victim! Oh!—this was the conviction that hemmed her in with an adamantine wall, and imbued with its own harrowing influence all the thoughts which swept through her brain and all the emotions which rolled their tidal fury through her breast. Was it possible that she could have been so mad—so insane—so rabid—so foolish, as to perpetrate a deed which thus conjured up a myriad perils to environ her, as if with a host of insatiate demons panting for her destruction—her ruin—her blood! But, hark!—what sound was that which made her start so convulsively? Was it a guttural moan from the throat of the corpse at her feet?—was it the wail of the restless spirit which had only been parted a few minutes from its mortal tenement?—or was it the voice of some unearthly being responding in mockery or in sympathy, to that tremendous eloquence of silent anguish and noiseless despair which filled the heart of the murderess? She listened—all was still—a profound tranquillity reigned throughout the house;—and in her own chamber it was indeed the stupendous silence of *death!*

Her imagination, then, had deceived her—and no sound had in reality reached her ears. But this stillness—this silence—oh! it was now becoming intolerable: it was something which began to weigh upon her heart like lead—it was not a mere *absence* of sound—it was the *presence* of an influence too mysterious to describe and too tremendous to endure. Oh! it seemed as if everything were now sepulchral that met her eyes in the yellow lustre of the night-lamp! She looked towards the bed: its snowy whiteness appalled her—for it appeared as if she were gazing on her own winding-sheet! She turned her eyes towards the windows—the drapery seemed to have a dark, funereal gloom! Her looks dwelt for an instant on a tall narrow clothes'-press of dark mahogany—and her fevered fancy represented it as an upright case containing skeletons! Once more her eyes turned wildly towards the casement—and there were they riveted with dread horror: for it appeared to the appalled imagination of the unhappy woman that between the opening of the window-curtains she beheld the marble countenance of a corpse looking in upon her! For nearly a minute did Mrs. Brace maintain her eyes fixed, in awful consternation, upon that phantom of her brain's creation: and all the while her tongue was locked as if by paralysis—and her limbs were deprived of motion—and she was like a statue that could *feel!* But at length her terror reached that point when she must either scream out or avert her eyes—and it was this latter species of relief which she was enabled to grant unto her own agonising soul. And then—O horror!—as she suddenly and shudderingly withdrew her looks from the *ideal face* of the dead at the window, they fell upon the *real one* which seemed to gaze up at her with its fixed and stony eyes as the corpse lay stretched upon the carpet!

A moan of indescribable anguish now burst from the lips of the wretched woman; and once more did she cover her countenance with her hands to shut out the appalling object from her view. But during the few moments that she thus veiled her physical vision, her feverish fancy acquired ten thousand times more activity than ever—and her imagination conjured up myriads of frightful shapes and terrific forms to harrow her with all the dread phantasmagoria of the grave! Then, unable to endure this exquisite refinement of torture, she opened her eyes again—and again did they irresistibly settle upon the face of that corpse with which she was thus *alone!*

Goaded almost to madness—feeling that her senses were abandoning her—and yet not daring to fly from the room nor to summon assistance, the miserable woman once more caught eagerly at the idea of suicide which flashed back into her heated brain;—and, rushing to the cupboard she was about to seize upon the phial of Prussic acid, when her unquiet conscience made her fling a startled glance to her right and to her left as she was about to commit this new crime. And then—with an ineffable aggravation of all the horror which previously filled her soul—did she suddenly become transfixed to the spot, while her entire frame grew all in a moment paralysed and petrified: for the furtive look which she had thrown around was arrested once again by the phantom face that her disordered imagination depicted as gazing in upon her through the window!

So strong was the delusion that during the minute which elapsed while Mrs. Brace was thus held in statue-like thraldom, unable to stir a limb—unable to give utterance to a sound—unable also to withdraw her eyes from that object of terrible attraction—during this minute of an appalling fascination, we say, her mind exercised an activity and an inventiveness which only added to the horrors of her thoughts and enhanced the poignancy of her mental excruciation. For the face which thus seemed to be looking in upon her, took all the ghastly lineaments of the grave: its flesh was of that yellowish white which marks the corpse—its eyes were fixed with stony, lustreless, and yet not altogether inexpressive glare—its black brows were strongly pencilled above the deep cavernous sockets wherein the glassy orbs were set—and the lips were thin and of a blueish pallor. All these characteristics did the horror-stricken woman behold—or rather fancy that she beheld: for the entire portraiture, with its supernal vividness, was nothing more than the offspring of her own disordered fancy. But at length unable any longer to endure the contemplation of an object which to *her* had all the appearance and produced all the effects of the sternest reality, she burst as it were

from the moral tetanos which held her spell-bound; and clapping her hands frantically to her throbbing brows, she gave utterance to a hollow moan and sank upon the carpet.

CHAPTER CXXXV.

A NIGHT WITH A MURDERED MAN.

THE lamp which stood upon the table immediately began to grow dim as if a mist were perceptibly rising around it: steadily did that dimness increase every moment—until the light was subdued down into the faint glimmer of a distant star—and then it expired altogether, leaving the chamber involved in the blackest darkness.

And upon the floor the milliner was stretched, under the influence of an irresistible rigidity which retained her spell-bound from the hair of her head to the soles of her feet. An appalling consternation was upon her—and yet she could not move a muscle nor give vent to a sound. Her mouth was fast closed as with lockjaw; and the same dreadful species of tetanos held all her limbs in its iron prisonage, leaving to every fibre and tendon the acuteness of feeling and to every sense its peculiar faculty—but suspending all motion, and reducing the woman to the condition of an animated statue.

Yes—but a statue animated with a vitality as fresh and a perception as vivid as if not a single function nor physical power were held in abeyance;—and thus everything which might happen to the miserable being while in this state, was certain to be characterised by a tremendous aggravation of concomitant feeling. Complete and effectual as was the physical restraint, so acute and keen was the moral perception;—and the moment Mrs. Brace became aware that she was reduced to this awful position, she likewise found herself enveloped in a darkness so pitchy that it seemed to be a black mist filling the atmosphere with its stifling density.

All that had passed during the earlier portion of the night she recollected well; and slowly—nay even methodically—did she revolve in her memory the various incidents which had so terribly marked those hours. At length she reached as it were the end of her reflections—that appalling term reminding her that she was now alone in the room with the corpse of the murdered man!

Yes—upon this tremendous truth did her thoughts settle;—and she said within herself, "The dead body lies upon the same carpet where I am stretched. It is only a few feet distant—and if I could stretch out my arm I should touch it with my hand. But heaven forbid that I should seek thus to come in contact with it, even were I able to move a member or a limb. And, O horror! if the corpse itself were to extend its arm——"

The wretched milliner stopped short in her reflections, which had suddenly become too soul-harrowing to permit a continuance;—and over her entire frame, so rigid and statue-like, a glacial shudder passed. But it was not she who moved convulsively *beneath* the influence of this shudder: no—it was the icy tremor which rolled slowly *over* her, with the clammy sensation produced by the contact of a loathsome snake.

Entombed as it were in the midst of that stupendous darkness—stretched helpless, motionless, and voiceless upon the carpet—with all her powers of perception, feeling, and endurance more vividly awake and more acutely susceptible than ever she had known them before—and having upon her mind the astounding conviction that within a few feet of her there was the corpse of the man whom she herself had murdered,—was not such a position enough to deprive the miserable woman of reason and blast her intellect with the searing lightning of madness all in a moment?

But, no—it was not within the range of her destiny that she should experience relief even in the dark mazes of mental aberration: and thus the weight of consternation crushed not at one moment—and the poignancy of anguish rent not reason's powers at another,—although tremendous indeed was the trial to which the strength of the woman's intellect was put by those rapid and torturing alternations.

How long she had lain in that position, she knew not: what hour of the night it was, she could not surmise. Nor was she able to form the least conjecture as to the cause which held her thus spell-bound. She was not circled by cords nor chains: for, if she were, she would feel the bonds upon her person—and moreover she would be at least enabled to move her limbs somewhat. But not a hair's breadth could she stir them—not a hair's breadth could she turn her head either to the right or to the left. And what was more wondrous still—her eyes were wide open, and the lids did not wink!

The tetanos was thus complete: but whence did it arise! Was it from some infernal spell—some diabolical incantation?—or was it the forewarning of the awful visitation of God's wrath upon her? These conjectures were as bewildering as their nature was soul-harrowing;—and every instant was laden with thoughts the anguish of which was sufficient to expand throughout a whole century o existence and fill it with an unceasing woe!

Again and again did the miserable woman reflect that she was alone in that chamber with the corpse of the murdered man;—and again and again did she think within herself that if the same miraculous and incomprehensible power which had reduced her to so helpless a condition of thraldom, should inspire that dead body with the motion, the power, and the will to harm or to terrify her, she must lie still and endure that crowning horror,—for not a finger could she raise in her defence—not a sound could she articulate to summon assistance!

For the fiftieth time these excruciating reflections passed athwart the milliner's imagination, as if a long iron wire armed with a myriad little sharp blades were dragged slowly through her brain, cutting its ferocious way amidst the very quick of the vital mass:—yes—for the fiftieth time had she endured the crucifixion of those lancinating thoughts, when a church-clock proclaimed the hour of three.

Thrice spoke the iron tongue of Time—and the sound carried the cold sensation of the tomb to the heart of the milliner. She knew not why it was—but the announcement of that hour appeared pregnant with awful omen to the mind of that miserable woman. More dread—more solemn—more sepulchral than before was the stillness which succeeded the striking of the clock: it was the profound tranquillity of the grave—the stupendous silence of the tomb!

But, O horror! what sound is that which now reaches the ears of Mrs. Brace and carries an ice-bolt to her heart? It is the rustling of a garment—the slight, faint, and scarcely audible noise produced by a human being slowly turning upon a carpet. And that sound came from within a few feet of the horror-stricken woman—aye, from the very direction in which the corpse lay!

To say that she listened with breathless attention, were to inspire the idea that she had power over her respiration;—whereas, this faculty had remained miraculously suspended from the instant that the tetanos commenced,—her bosom never rising nor sinking once the whole time, but resting stationary and pulseless like the bust of a marble statue. Had not the breath, however, been thus suspended under the influence of the miraculous trance, it would assuredly have become so, and the blood would have turned to ice in the milliner's veins, as that rustling sound stole gradually—gradually—gradually upon her ears.

Conceive that woman chained as it were to the ground by the invisible and impalpable but not less adamantine bonds of a tremendous torpor which locked up the physical powers only, and left the moral perceptions to acquire a more poignant keenness from this total release of their allegiance to the substantial being;—conceive her, we say, thus lying stretched upon her back as powerless and as helpless as if she were made of stone, and yet alive—Oh! God knows how painfully, acutely alive to every circumstance and every influence in any way affecting her;—conceive her in this appalling position, with the harrowing conviction slowly, steadily, and surely stealing into her soul that the corpse of the murdered man was not only moving, but was actually creeping towards her!

Talk of the horrors of churchyards by night—talk of the hideous spectres which throng over the grave of the suicide in the cross-road—talk of the ghastly shapes which crowd around the gibbet to which the bleaching bones of the murderer hang—talk of the overwhelming terrors of the night-mare,—and all these, even when combined together, would fall far short in furnishing an adequate idea of the harrowing nature of those feelings which now took possession of the miserable murderess.

Was it possible that the man had only been in a fit and had come back to life? No: this hypothesis was absurd—for the dose of poison was sufficient to kill a dozen men as powerful and as full of vigorous health as he:—and, moreover, had he not fallen from his chair as if suddenly struck by lightning?—and had not she seen his corpse-like countenance fixed rigidly in death, ere the lamp had been so mysteriously extinguished?

Then—holy God! was it possible that new life had been infused into the dead man?—had the terrible anticipation of the milliner been signally and awfully fulfilled?—and was the corpse endowed with the motion, the power, and the will either to harm or to affright her? Yes—all this was possible—as possible, she felt assured, that she herself could be thus invisibly enchained and thus stretched motionless and powerless on the carpet by some miraculous and superhuman spell!

But while these thoughts were whirling through her brain, the rustling sound—that awful indication of the movement of the dead—was approaching nearer and nearer! Had it been a serpent winding its way towards her, and forcing upon her active imagination all the horrors of its undulating coils and slimy touch,—the effect would not have been half so appalling as was this preternatural, gradient, yet steady and persevering progress of a corpse through the black darkness which filled the chamber.

Fearful as was the consternation which now sate upon the soul of Mrs. Brace, and harrowed as her feelings were, she nevertheless had clearness and vigour of perception sufficient to mark every characteristic, no matter how trivial, of the astounding incident that was now taking place. Thus, her ear becoming accustomed to the rustling sound, she was enabled to form a conjecture of the precise nature of the motion which the body must be undergoing in order to produce that exact noise; and she came to the conclusion that the corpse was being moved—or was moving itself, whichever it might be,—flat along the carpet upon its back.

For five minutes did this awful portion of the supernatural drama last,—five mortal minutes, each appearing to be a century and each to contain the essence of whole ages of excruciating torture! At length the wretched woman became aware that the corpse was close beside her;—and yet not a hair's breadth could she recoil from the coming contact—not the distance of a pin's point could she move a limb away! The natural impulse of an agonising horror was to contract her entire form even within herself, as it were: but this faculty was denied her—so strong, so insuperable was the magic spell thrown upon her by the tetanos.

And now came the awful moment—a moment more fully fraught with undiluted horror than even that when the culprit upon the gallows feels the trap-door slipping away beneath his feet, or when the sailor who has fallen overboard in the southern seas hears the gush of the shark through the water close behind him. Such a moment was it—nay, a more harrowing one still, we affirm—that had now arrived in the existence of Mrs. Brace,—the moment when she felt the first marble-cold touch of the hand of the corpse!

And her own hand was it that thus experienced the initiative contact,—her own right hand which lay by her side as powerless and as completely petrified so far as motion was concerned as all the rest of her body! Slowly—slowly did the corpse pass its cold, cold hand over that of the milliner, who shuddered inwardly, but without contracting her form in any way or to the slightest degree. That shudder was a sensation—and not a movement,—a feeling—and not a real tremor!

From her own hand the hand of the corpse passed slowly up her arm, which was naked to a little above the elbow;—and as the touch of the dead traced its way by very slow degrees over her own plump flesh, she could feel the animal heat in herself gradually retiring beneath the appalling contact which she was thus doomed to experience. Was it not—oh! was it not hell upon earth?—and had not her punishment already begun in this world with a foretaste of the horrors of Satan's Kingdom?

Though she recoiled as it were within herself from this atrocious penance—though she revolted with a rending anguish against so diabolical a torture,—yet did she remain in a condition of utter inability to make any real or effectual movement. Not to a hair's-breadth could she shift her position: a living statue was she!

And now over the upper portion of her dress passed the heavy cold hand of the corpse—and on to her bosom was continued the loathsome, terrible contact. At the same time that the presence of the dead was thus upon the ample, firm, and exuberant contours which had so often heaved in amorous sport and so frequently pillowed the head of some favoured lover,—at the same moment, we say, that the hand of the corpse thus slowly began to wander over the luxuriant globe that palpitated no longer in wanton enjoyment, but was motionless as the breast of the marble statue,—at the same instant was it the horrified woman became aware that the dead body of the murdered man was still drawing itself closer and closer to her side!

And then it really appeared to her as if a scream rose up to the very tip of her tongue, but was stopped by the closed portals formed by her compressed lips;—and thus still did her mortal anguish continue to grow the more excruciating from her utter inability to give expression to it.

From her bosom the hand passed slowly—Ah! and with a revolting touch like that of a slimy serpent—along the neck of the tortured woman, as she thus lay motionless on the floor. Over her chin went the hand—then it passed gradiently upon her left cheek—and all this while the corpse was drawing close up to her right side! At length the hand quitted her countenance—and the arm wound itself by degrees about her neck, the dead body turning itself towards her the while!

And now the corpse raised itself sufficiently to stoop over and place its cold countenance in contact with the cheek of the milliner;—and the arm that circled her neck, appeared to press her lovingly. O heavens! who can describe the hideousness—the revolting loathsomeness—the mortal horror of that unnatural embrace? But, as if the cup of gall, and filth, and abomination should be filled even to the overflowing,—as if there should be nothing required to render this monstrous drama as complete in all its details as possible,—and as if this foretaste of posthumous punishment were to be crowned with all the horrors conceivable by mortal imagination,—the corpse slowly, but surely and resolutely, glued its lips to the mouth of the milliner and sent with its awful caress an ice-chill throughout her whole frame.

The powers of human endurance were now tested to the extreme—the strength of the human intellect was tried to the last degree. A terrible revulsion ensued all in a moment: the limbs of the woman recovered their power of movement—her jaws were unlocked—and with a cry of mingled horror and anguish she started up.

The light of morning was streaming in between the curtains; and as the milliner cast her eyes wildly around her, they encountered the face of Peter Grumley's corpse, lying precisely in the same spot and in the same position as when it had fallen from the chair.

Then Mrs. Brace knew that she had been labouring under the influence of a horrible night-mare—a long dream made up of such frightful incidents that the memory thereof must inevitably follow her to the grave, even should her life extend to the uttermost stretch of human existence!

The truth was that when she had sunk down upon the carpet under the influence of the terror caused by the belief that she beheld the countenance of a corpse at the window, the partial fit which had thus seized upon her yielded to the effects of utter exhaustion of mind and body; and a deep slumber fell upon her eyes. No marvel, then, was it if the dread tragedy of the night haunted her in the dreams which accompanied her sleep;—and the frightful activity of her disordered fancy displayed its power in the appalling vision which we have detailed so minutely.

But though now released from the terrors of that shocking night-mare, Mrs. Brace still found herself in the presence of the tremendous embarrassment which her crime had created. She looked at her watch: it was half-past six o'clock in the morning! The night was gone—and nothing was done to dispose of the corpse. Such was her reflection;—and then came the maddening conviction that she could not possibly make away with it unless by the assistance of one or more of her domestics. But to place herself in *their* power——Ah! better have remained at the mercy of Peter Grumley and have been spared the remorse and the dangers attendant upon the crime of murder!

But what was she to do?—how was she to act? It was useless to repine any more: the past could not be recalled—and it became imperiously necessary to adopt measures for the security of the future. Upon the body she stood gazing for some minutes while these thoughts passed through her mind;—and she no longer experienced any feelings of terror—*for it is not by day-light that murderers are afraid!*

But what was she to do? A hundred times in a minute did she ask herself this question; and no satisfactory answer could she give. At length she reasoned with herself that nothing could now be done for some hours—that she must conceal the corpse as well as she could until the next night—and in the meantime there would be ample leisure to resolve upon the most prudent course to be then adopted.

Having thus succeeded in looking at her position with more calmness and deliberation than she had hitherto been enabled to call to her assistance from the moment the Bow Street Officer fell a corpse at her feet, the milliner resolved to conceal the body in her bath-room adjoining. She however found it no easy task to drag so huge a mass into that place: but at length she accomplished this task; and, locking the door, she felt that she could begin to breathe more freely.

She now hastened to lay aside her garments, which she had worn all night; but when she approached the mirror, she recoiled in horror and dismay at the ghastly countenance that was reflected therein. And yet those features were her own—and it was no spectral face which looked at her through the medium of that glass!

But, great heavens! what an effect had this one night of suffering, terror, guilt, and anguish produced upon the milliner! Her eyes were sunken and hollow—her lips were livid—her face was cadaverous where the rouge lay not upon it—and upon the cheeks that paint added to the ghastliness of her looks.

"This will not do," murmured Mrs. Brace to herself: "my appearance will excite the strangest suspicions! Nothing but my accustomed bath will effectually revive me!"

And to take this bath it was necessary to return into the place whither she had dragged the corpse: but as the beams of morning grew brighter within the rooms, all superstitious terrors evaporated from

the milliner's breast. She accordingly laid aside her apparel—entered the bath-room—threw a cloth over the countenance of the dead body—and indulged in her wonted immersion in cold water.

On issuing from the bath-room, she once more looked the door carefully; and, contemplating herself in the glass, murmured in a tone of mingled triumph and satisfaction, "The night I have passed was terrible—terrible: but it has not left a trace which the world's eye shall observe!"

The milliner then proceeded with her toilette; and in half-an-hour she descended to the apartment where her young ladies were assembled for breakfast.

And no one could possibly have imagined nor would ever have believed, if informed of the fact, that within the previous eight hours Mrs. Brace had not only committed a murder but had passed every moment of that period alone with the corpse of her victim!

And who that passed by the house that morning and saw all the usual preparations being made for the commercial business of the day,—the shop windows decked out with bonnets of the newest shape, caps of the most coquettish fashion and lace collars of the most costly species,—and then, glancing into the shop itself, that bevy of charming young women all wearing so modest a demeanour and all attired with such exquisite neatness,—who, we ask, that thus beheld the establishment of Mrs. Brace that morn, could have possibly suspected that there was the corpse of a murdered man in the house!

CHAPTER CXXXVI.

THE BARONET AND THE ROYAL MAIDEN.

We must take a temporary leave of Mrs. Brace, inasmuch as before we can continue the thread of her adventures, there is an episode of interest and importance which must be duly woven into our narrative.

The scene shifts to the environs of Windsor, where Sir Richard Stamford was occupying furnished apartments in a comfortable but secluded dwelling kept by a worthy old couple who never troubled themselves about other people's business. There were no other lodgers in the house; and thus the baronet not only enjoyed the retirement which was so necessary to tranquillise a mind that had passed through so much torturing excitement, but he was likewise free from any of that espionage or impertinent observation which any peculiarity of habits usually entails upon the individual who establishes his quarters in a provincial town.

It was about noon on the day following that fearful night the incidents of which have occupied the preceding chapter; and Sir Richard Stamford was seated in the parlour at his lodging, busily engaged in the perusal of some letters which he had just received from his solicitor at Aylesbury. The contents appeared to give him satisfaction; and it was even with an expression of mingled joy and triumph upon his countenance that he glanced from time to time at the totals presented by two long columns of figures on a balance-sheet that lay spread out before him.

In the midst of this occupation he was interrupted by a gentle knock at the door of his apartment; and having desired the individual to enter, he sprang from his seat with an ejaculation of mingled delight and astonishment on beholding the Princess Amelia!

Her Royal Highness was attired with an elegant simplicity which became her style of beauty far more advantageously than the richest apparel gemmed with precious stones. The modest gipsy-hat enhanced the air of winning softness and sweet amiability which characterised her countenance; and the rich contours of her full, voluptuous form were developed rather than concealed by the plain dress which fitted closely to her fine luxuriant shape.

The smile that wreathed her lips parted them so as to display the teeth of dazzling whiteness;—and her cheeks were the healthy glow of virginal freshness that had deepened with the rapid walk which the royal lady had taken through the park.

"Beautiful Princess!" exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford, throwing himself upon his knees before her and pressing to his lips the hand which she extended towards him; "how can I sufficiently testify my gratitude for this honour—this unexpected pleasure——"

"If you mean to regard my visit as an honour, Sir Richard," said the Princess, "you will at once invest it with a cold formality which will destroy all the meaning and significance which I had wished to impart to it. In a word, it was as a friend that I came to see you——"

"And as my good genius—my guardian angel, do I welcome you!" cried the baronet, again pressing Amelia's hand to his lips: then, rising from his knees and gently conducting her to a seat, he placed himself by her side, saying, "This is the happiest moment I have known for a long, long time—and far happier than I had ever hoped to experience again."

"Now you speak in a manner which gives me pleasure," said the Princess: but, feeling that a blush was rapidly overspreading her countenance, she hastened to observe, "We have pledged a lasting and indestructible friendship to each other—and it was this sentiment which prompted me to take a step that under other circumstances would be improper and inconsistent to a degree. Tell me, therefore, that you do not think less of me for having intruded myself upon your privacy: tell me that I have not suffered in your estimation!"

"Oh! my dearest friend—for such you have permitted me to call you, and such you have indeed proved yourself," exclaimed the baronet, surveying the Princess with a species of holy adoration in which there was naught gross nor sensual,—"how is it possible that you can ask me if I be offended by this condescending proof of your kindness towards me? When we have walked together for hours in the park and the wind has been too cold for you to sit down to rest yourself, I should have besought you to bless my humble dwelling with your presence if only for a few minutes: but I was fearful of giving offence. And yet I have felt at the time how happy I should be if you were to cross the threshold of this apartment where I pass so many hours alone——thinking of you," he added, in a tone of deep and fervid emotion.

"Then I am glad that I have on this occasion obeyed the sudden fancy that took possession of me as I was traversing the park," said the Princess Amelia, her own voice sounding tremulously as if it were laden with ineffable feeling. "For I came forth to walk at an earlier hour than usual this morning!

she continued; "and knowing that you would not think of coming to meet me until half-past twelve, I resolved to surprise you by this visit—which perhaps speaks more eloquently on behalf of my friendship than of my discretion," she observed, in a tone of embarrassment and with a blush again deepening the vermeil glow upon her damask cheeks.

"My angelic friend," exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford, now taking her hand of his own accord, 'do not mar by any regret or compunction on your part the pleasure which this visit causes me to experience. Hitherto, amiable Princess, you have performed towards me the part of the good Samaritan. You have poured the oil and wine of sympathy and consolation into the wounds of my spirit: you have rescued me from the doom of misanthropy and the fate of cynicism;—and, guiding me gently out of the bleak and desolate wilderness of my own dark thoughts, you have tutored me to contemplate the roses of hope which yet bloom in this world even for one who has endured so much as I. Had it not been for you, excellent Princess, I should have resigned myself to despair ——or perhaps have flown to that more terrible alternative to which the desperate have recourse, but of which I now shudder even to think. Oh! how deep, then, is the debt of gratitude which I owe to you, generous-hearted lady;—and how immensely have you augmented that obligation by the frank, ingenuous, and friendly manner in which you have now visited me. Henceforth this room will appear to me under another and far more cheerful aspect; and when seated alone herein, contemplating your image, I shall retain the delightful remembrance that you yourself have lightened the darkness of my abode!"

"You are addressing me with an enthusiasm which carries an ineffable pleasure into my soul," said the Princess Amelia: "for I perceive that I have been the means of restoring you at least to some degree of happiness."

"Dear lady, when I am in your presence," returned the baronet, gazing with admiration upon her, "the past—frightful as it is—appears only as a dream, or as something which is so far off as scarcely to leave a black shade in the memory."

"And when I am not with you, the gloomy cloud comes back to sit upon your soul and brood the darkest thoughts?" said the Princess, her voice assuming a tenderness which stole like elysian music upon the senses of the baronet and carried a soft ecstacy of feeling in unto the very depths of his soul.

"Alas! when I am alone," he observed, after a pause of nearly a minute and now heaving a profound sigh, "I have only your image to solace me! But then I ponder upon every word that has fallen from your lips during the hours we have been together—and I repeat a thousand times to myself the solacing assurance which you always give me at parting, that we shall meet again on the morrow. And we *do* meet thus day after day—and my existence appears to have undergone so complete a change and have entered upon a phase so thoroughly new that there are moments when I cease even to regret the prosperity of earlier years."

"And in order to keep you in this happy frame of mind," said the royal maiden, lowering her voice to a whisper that was only just audible, as she bent down her head to conceal her blushes,—"and likewise to prevent the return of the gloomy mood, I should never leave you."

"Great heaven! what words are these which you have uttered?" ejaculated the baronet, starting in mingled amazement and alarm at the sudden intuition which sprang up in his mind—or rather at the light which was thrown all in a moment upon the state of his own feelings.

"Wherefore this excitement?" asked the Princess, gazing upon him anxiously.

"Because you have just made an observation, dear lady," responded the baronet, "which has opened my mental eyes to a truth unsuspected until now, and the sudden revelation of which to my senses produced mingled feelings of surprise and terror."

"And that truth—what is it?" demanded the Princess Amelia, trembling all over and still contemplating the baronet with those lovely azure eyes which appeared to swim in a delicious languor.

"I dare not answer your question," replied Sir Richard, now evincing much embarrassment and confusion.

"If there be secrets between us, Richard," murmured the royal maiden, "what becomes of the friendship which we have pledged each other?"

"Oh! what am I to say?—what am I to do?" exclaimed the baronet, his whole frame quivering with emotions of an indescribable ecstacy as he pressed the hand of the Princess in his own and gazed intently on her beauteous, blushing countenance; for this was the first time she had ever ventured to call him by his Christian name alone — and the circumstance amounted almost to an avowal on her part, or at least to an encouragement of such an avowal from his lips.

"What are you to say?" repeated the Princess, who herself felt as if she were bathing in a fount of bliss and as if the gates of paradise were slowly unfolding to her contemplation all the joys within. "What are you to say, do you ask?" she murmured again: "Oh! answer me frankly and candidly—and tell me the nature of that truth which has so suddenly become apparent to your comprehension?"

"But I may offend you, dear Princess—I may risk your friendship—that friendship which I value more than life!" exclaimed the baronet, bewildered how to act.

"No feeling which you are capable of harbouring can possibly offend me, Richard," said Amelia, her tone expressing the soft sensuousness which was diffused throughout her entire frame and was expressed in the deepening hue of the swimming eyes and the glowing tint which spread its carnation richness over her cheeks.

"Then you command me to speak candidly, dear Princess?" said the baronet.

"No—I do not command," she responded, with an accent of gentle reproach: "I beseech—I implore."

"Then hear the truth, adorable Amelia," exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford, throwing himself again upon his knees at her feet: and gazing up into her blushing, burning face with looks full of ineffable devotion, he said in a voice of fervent passion, "I love you, Amelia — my God! I love you with all the power of a grateful soul and an adoring heart!"

"You love me—you love me?" murmured the Princess, now enjoying the happiest moment of her life; and casting her arms around the neck of

the handsome man who knelt at her feet, she gave back with ardour the warm kisses which he imprinted upon her lips, her cheeks, and her brow.

"Love you!—yes—oh! yes—such sympathy as I have received from you, sweet lady, could not fail to engender love," responded Sir Richard Stamford.

"Thank God! he loves me—he loves me!" still murmured the Princess Amelia, appearing to pour her whole soul—her life—her being, into the ecstacy produced by the avowal of affection which she had received from the lips of the baronet.

"And is it possible that you can love me in return?" he asked, rising slowly from his knees and resuming his place by her side, although without disengaging himself from the warm embrace in which she held him.

"It is possible—it is true—it is God's own truth that I love you—that I would lay down my life to serve you!" exclaimed the royal maiden, with impassioned vehemence; and she continued to lavish her caresses with the fondest ardour upon the baronet.

"Your friendship, Amelia, was a boon which could not be too dearly prized," he said, returning the kisses which she thus bestowed upon him: "but your love—oh! *that* is a happiness so totally unexpected—so unlooked for——"

"Ah! is it possible that you could have mistaken the feeling with which I regarded you, Richard?" inquired the Princess, in a tone of tender reproach. "Did you not perceive that I loved you?"

"I dared not trust my thoughts upon the subject," replied the baronet. "But the nature of my own feelings was not understood by me until those words which you uttered just now struck as it were upon the concealed chord of tenderness and vibrated to my very heart's core. Thence the inspiration was carried to the brain—and I perceived in a moment that I loved you!"

"Oh! what happiness is it to love and be beloved!" murmured the Princess, suffering her bonnet to fall off and reclining her head upon the baronet's shoulder: then, closing her eyes for nearly a minute as if to shut out all external objects and thus render the revel of her own thoughts all the more luxuriously complete, she said, "And have I indeed taught your heart to love once more, Richard?—and do you really comprehend the nature of your own sentiments? Because it would break my heart were you to tell me, to-morrow—or in a week—or in a month—or even in a year, that you were mistaken—that you were carried away by the enthusiasm of a moment——"

"Oh! do not mistrust the nature of that passion which I experience for you," interrupted the baronet, looking down into the depths of those beauteous azure eyes which the royal maiden now opened again, and which gave back a living flood of fondness in return for his own adoring gaze: "do not suspect the truth nor doubt the sincerity of that sentiment which has become a worship—a faith—a creed—an enthusiastic devotion in my soul! Nor marvel, beauteous Amelia, that a being lately so lorn, desolate, and woe-begone as I, can have thus learnt to love so soon and so tenderly again. For all that has happened is natural and easily to be explained;—and I were indeed something less or something more than man had I not yielded to the elysian influence wherewith I was surrounded. Not a month has elapsed since you found me the most miserable wretch upon the face of the earth. Every hope which could possibly bind me to existence, was dead—crucified by the faithlessness of a woman and the treachery of friends! And thus had my bosom become the burial-place of life's brightest promises—the grave of every aspiration which this world's sun had gilded. My heart was a tomb wherein reposed the memories of blighted affections, ruined hopes, and false friendships: and at the entrance of that sepulchral heart had the demon of despair placed a stone to bar admission against all tender sympathies. But you came, Amelia: you rolled away that stone——and you sate in my heart as an angel, proclaiming the resurrection of hope!"

"Oh! it is delightful to hear you thus account for that love which fills your soul, and which I no longer mistrust nor doubt," cried the Princess, flinging herself upon the baronet's breast and appearing to grow there. "And I thank God," she continued in a tone of exalted fervour, "that I have been the instrument of thus re-awakening you to a sense of earth's bliss and the world's enjoyment."

"This world has suddenly become a paradise to my view," responded Sir Richard Stamford. "And yet—even now in the midst of this felicity which is so transcendent as to appear a dream,—even now, I say, does a sudden cause of alarm spring up——"

"Alarm!" echoed the Princess, withdrawing herself partially from his embrace and surveying him with mingled apprehension and surprise.

"Oh! the alarm to which I allude, springs from the love which I bear you," hastily exclaimed the baronet; "and it is indeed a natural consequence of that passion."

"I do not understand you yet, Richard," said the royal maiden. "In mercy explain yourself—and keep me not in suspense."

"I mean, dearest Amelia," resumed the baronet, contemplating her with ineffable fondness, "that the love which I experience is not centred in a common object—but in a lady of the most exalted rank,—a lady to whose hand I dare not aspire, and with whom no clandestine marriage would be legal——"

"The love which I bear for you has no consideration of rites, ceremonies, or forms," interrupted the Princess Amelia, with a decision which belonged to her character, but which the strength of her passion now mainly inspired. "It is a love," she continued, looking steadily upon his countenance, "which can recognise no human laws—no conventional statutes,—a love acknowledging only the heart's tenderest and holiest ties—the soul's most sacred and solemn bonds. If this be the love that you can accept and that will make you happy—if this be the passion that you can reciprocate as tenderly and as devotedly——"

"Oh! can you doubt it, my best beloved—my charming Amelia?" exclaimed Sir Richard Stamford, catching her in his arms and straining her to his breast. "This is indeed a day of happiness for me! I awoke with a presentiment that many occurrences of a smiling character were to take place ere night should come again. And I have not been disappointed! Behold those letters," he continued, pointing towards the papers lying upon the table: "they are from my solicitor at Aylesbury, and they arrived this morning. Their contents are far more cheering than even my most sanguine hopes could have led me to believe. All my property has been sold and realised: the Earl of Desborough has become the purchaser of the Manor at a large price—and not only has every creditor of the late bank been paid in full, but a handsome income remains for me. That balance-sheet, dearest Amelia, enables me to hold up my head again and look the world in the face."

"Oh! sincerely—most sincerely do I congratulate you, my beloved Richard," exclaimed the Princess. "Heaven knows you have suffered enough—and it is time that the wheel of fortune should turn."

"It *has* turned—and a new phase is presented to my view," observed the baronet. "Oh! how can I be otherwise than thoroughly happy—at least as happy as a man may be who has endured so much as I. My character is fully cleared up—my liabilities are settled—the world once more calls me an honourable man—and then comes your love, my angel Amelia, to bless me with its heavenly influence! And that love—oh! I accept it as you have offered—I accept it as the pure incense of your affectionate heart—and I will remain worthy of it until death shall separate us."

"And on my side," said the Princess, "I vow most solemnly and I call heaven to attest the oath, that I will remain single for your sake——"

"Oh! pledge not yourself thus rashly!" interrupted the baronet with vehemence.

"Nay—hinder me not," said the royal maiden, with a tone and manner of indomitable decision, while her beauteous countenance became lighted up by a kindred glow of enthusiasm: "hinder me not, I say—nor fear that I shall ever repent of the words I am about to utter. But hear me patiently and attentively while I invoke heaven to attest my vow that I will remain unmarried, Richard, for thy sake—that I will reject every negotiation which

may be made by others for the disposal of my hand—and that I will live and die thy wife in the sight of heaven, if not in the eyes of the world!"

"The tongue of man has no language to express an adequate amount of gratitude for so much disinterested love," said Sir Richard Stamford, sinking upon one knee and pressing the fair hand of the Princess between both his own. "Your vow is recorded—solemnly recorded, Amelia,—and I do not ask you to withdraw it. Your love is therefore pledged to me—and in return I pledge thee mine! Yes—dearest and most beauteous of women, accept the tenderest affection united with the most fervent gratitude of my heart; and believe that I will perish sooner than cause thee pain either by word or deed."

"And these vows which we have exchanged are irrevocable!" said the Princess Amelia, in a solemn tone, as she forced her lover to rise from his kneeling posture: then, throwing herself into his arms, she said, "Richard, I am thy wife—thy wife in the sight of heaven—and thou art my husband!"

CHAPTER CXXXVII.

THE EXCITEMENT AND TERRORS OF GUILT.

We must now return to Mrs. Brace and take up the thread of her adventures which we were compelled to relinquish for a moment.

Although she continued to wear a smiling face in the presence of her young ladies,—and although, when customers came, she assumed an exterior which was admirably calculated to produce the impression that no woman in the universe enjoyed a mental tranquillity more complete than her own,—yet throughout the live-long day did she in reality endure the tortures of the damned.

Again must we observe that this poignancy of feeling arose not so much from remorse as from alarm, vexation, and despair at the perilous position in which she had placed herself. For every minute recurred the question—What was she to do with the body?—and the oftener she put this interrogatory to herself, the more bewildered did she become.

Then, the necessity of maintaining a pleasant exterior was a task very far from being unaccompanied with difficulty; and she felt that it was hard indeed—nay, fraught with a mental agony the most acute—to wreathe her lips into smiles while a vulture was gnawing at her heart.

In the course of the forenoon, Harriet applied to her for the key of the bath-chamber that the housemaid might perform her usual duties there; and Mrs. Brace was compelled to invent some excuse the triviality of which made her blush up to the very hair of her head as she uttered it—and then the colour disappeared as rapidly with the mortal terror that struck to her heart. But Harriet noticed not that the apology was ridiculous or that there was anything peculiar in the manner of her mistress; it was conscience which thus rendered the wretched woman a coward and made her not only suspect her own actions but likewise the construction which might be put upon them.

In the afternoon an ill-looking fellow called at the fashionable establishment in Pall Mall and insisted upon seeing Mrs. Brace alone. He would not state his business—nor yet send in his name; and when this doggedness of conduct on his part was communicated by a domestic to the milliner, she was struck by a mortal chill as if Death had suddenly seized upon her. For the first tremendous thought which the message excited in her mind, was that her crime had been some how or another suspected and that an officer of justice was coming to search the house. But at the next moment she discarded the idea as one which her terrors could alone have generated; and regaining her presence of mind by an almost preterhuman effort, she commanded the domestic to admit the persevering visitor into her presence.

The moment the fellow was shown to the parlour where she waited to receive him, she recognised a man whom she had seen in Grumley's company at Bow Street; and once more was she nearly annihilated by the tremendous terror which fell upon her like a dead weight. Sinking back into the chair whence she had risen, she demanded the man's business in a voice which despair alone endowed with any degree of firmness.

Her emotion was not likely to escape the keen glance of so watchful an individual as Mobbs—for he the visitor was: but as there happened to be wine-decanters upon the table, it instantaneously struck the officer that Mrs. Brace had been indulging somewhat too freely—in plain terms, that she was drunk. He accordingly said within himself, "Grumley was right—she *is* a very fine woman: but it's a pity she drinks so precious hard!"

Then, having hastily made this reflection to himself, Mr. Mobbs proceeded to observe that he was a Bow Street Officer, and that this was the reason he did not choose to send in his name or profession—as he thought that Mrs. Brace would prefer granting him a personal interview rather than exchange messages through the medium of the servant.

The extreme civility which Mobbs contrived to throw into his manner, and the language in which he embodied the above very natural explanation not only reassured Mrs. Brace, but likewise allowed her the leisure necessary to recover her self-possession; and, shocked at the idea that she had exhibited emotions which must be either incomprehensible to the man or upon which he must have put the strangest construction, she hastened to observe that she was suffering under a very severe indisposition of which a bewildering head-ache constituted a part. She then once more demanded the business which had brought Mobbs thither; and the man proceeded to explain himself in the following manner:—

"The fact is, ma'am, last night me and my master, Mr. Peter Grumley, the head officer of Bow Street, separated at your door—me going one way, and Mr. Grumley remaining behind to pay his respects to you. But he hasn't made his appearance this morning at the Office or yet been heerd of at his lodgings; and therefore I thought as how you might have sent him off somewhere on particklar business."

"It is perfectly true that your comrade called upon me last night," said Mrs. Brace, who had now altogether recovered her presence of mind: "but he did not remain with me above ten minutes or a quarter of an hour—and then he took his departure."

"Well, this is wery strange," said Mobbs, evidently much perplexed: then, after a few moments' deep thought, he observed inquiringly, "P'raps it wouldn't be too bold, ma'am, if I was to ask whether you paid him any money?"

"Yes—five hundred guineas, according to agreement," was the prompt answer. "I know that I may trust you as confidently as if it were Mr. Grumley himself," she added, with a smile.

"To be sure you may, ma'am," observed Mobbs: then recurring to the topic which was uppermost in his mind, he said in a musing tone, "I should scarcely think that Grumley has gone and got into dangerous company with all that swag about his person. He's rayther too knowing for that sort of thing; and as for his being attacked, robbed, and murdered in the open streets—*that* isn't likely."

"Depend upon it, your friend will make his appearance in the course of the day," said Mrs. Brace. "Perhaps he has taken a little drop too much in the company of some jovial revellers and is sleeping away his head-ache."

"No, ma'am—that isn't like Peter Grumley," said Mobbs, shaking his head ominously. "If he isn't murdered, then he's bolted—that's all!" ejaculated the man, a sudden idea striking him. "And now that I think well upon the subject, I dessay he *has* cut and run not only through fear of the consekvences of letting that young gal escape last night, but also to cheat me out of my reglars in respect to the five hundred guineas which he received from you."

"I should not at all wonder if you have hit upon the real truth at last," observed Mrs. Brace, scarcely able to restrain her joy at the false scent upon which the official understrapper had got. "Indeed, Mr. Grumley hinted to me last night that he was afraid it would prove the dearest five hundred guineas he ever fingered in all his life."

"Ah! if he said *that*, ma'am," exclaimed Mobbs, "there isn't no longer any doubt upon the subjeck. He's bolted, clear enough—and I'm left behind to bear the brunt."

"Well, as you were his associate in a matter which more or less interested myself," said Mrs. Brace, "I cannot suffer you to go altogether unrewarded; and I therefore beg your acceptance of these fifty guineas."

The eyes of Mobbs sparkled with delight as the milliner counted down the gold upon the table; and as he took up the shining pieces and weighed them in his rough horny hand, he expressed his thanks over and over again.

"Of course," said Mrs. Brace, as he was about to quit the room, "my name will not be mentioned under any circumstances, no matter what may transpire."

"Trust me for that, ma'am," rejoined Mobbs;—and he then took his departure.

Mrs. Brace now breathed far more freely than she had done for many hours; and thus the visit of Mobbs, which had at first assumed so ominous an aspect and struck such terror into her soul, proved the source of an incalculable relief to her apprehensions. She saw that Grumley's disappearance would everywhere receive the natural interpretation of a flight to avoid the consequences of letting a prisoner escape; and this conviction inspired her with a sense of security which nerved her to look calmly and deliberately at the embarrassment wherein she was placed with regard to the dead body.

The deeper she pondered upon the matter, the more imperiously necessary did it seem to admit some one to her confidence; and she finally resolved as the night approached, to entrust the tremendous secret to Harriet, her faithful abigail. But she postponed the evil moment as long as possible; and it was not until the young ladies had retired to rest and the clock was striking eleven, that the milliner, who was now seated alone in her parlour, could muster up courage sufficient to enter upon the appalling topic.

At length, feeling that an excitement was growing upon her which would speedily destroy all her resolution and throw her ideas into chaotic disorder, she rang the bell; and when Harriet made her appearance, she bade the young woman follow her up stairs to her own chamber.

Upon gaining this room, the milliner placed the candle upon the toilette-table and locked the door: then suddenly fixing her eyes, which had in a moment become wild and haggard, upon the lady's-maid, she said, in a deep voice, "Harriet, I am about to reveal to you a terrible secret!"

"Ah! madam, is it possible that you are on the point of giving birth to a child?" said the dependant, her knowledge of her mistress's frailty instantly exciting this idea in her mind.

"Would to God that it were no worse, Harriet!" returned Mrs. Brace, speaking in a hollow whisper. "But I implore you to steady your mind in order to receive as calmly as possible a revelation that is only too well calculated to fill you with horror."

"Merciful heavens! ma'am—what do you mean?" exclaimed Harriet, now catching the infection of the milliner's harrowed feelings.

"I mean," responded her mistress, in a still lower, deeper, and more hollow tone, while her looks expressed all the mingled anguish and terror that had become resuscitated in her soul,—"I mean, Harriet, that there is a dead body in yon bath-room——"

"O horror!" ejaculated the young woman with a stifling shriek—and staggering backward, she threw her eyes in unspeakable terror towards the door of the adjacent chamber.

"Silence—and courage—I conjure you!" said Mrs. Brace, clasping her hands in agonising entreaty. "If you alarm the house you will ruin me: but if you will assist me, I will load you with favours and benefits!"

"Speak, madam—what can I do?" demanded the lady's-maid, struggling as well as she was able against the horrified feelings that had seized upon her.

"Listen to me for a few moments, my dear Harriet," said the milliner, speaking with all the rapidity of a hysterical excitement. "You remember that the Bow Street Officer called last evening? Well—he became intoxicated—he pressed me with his licentious proposals—I was compelled to submit——My God! what could I do?——I conducted him hither—and all in a moment he fell down dead at my feet—stricken by the lightning-stroke of apoplexy!"

"Dead—at your feet!" echoed Harriet, shuddering convulsively and repeating the milliner's words with the mechanical impulse of dire horror.

"Yes—in an instant was I plunged into this cruel embarrassment," said Mrs. Brace: "and all last

night I remained here—alone with the corpse! Now you are acquainted with this terrible secret, Harriet——"

"Oh! I wish that I had never known it, ma'am!" exclaimed the young woman, covering her face with her hands as if to shut out some hideous object from her view.

"Ah! now you drive me to despair, Harriet!" moaned the wretched milliner. "My God! what is to be done!"

"I know not!" responded the abigail, dropping her hands suddenly, but only to wring them frantically. "It already seems to me as if a murder had been committed and that I was an accessory!"

"A murder!" repeated Mrs. Brace in a hollow tone and with a convulsive start: then, fixing her haggard eyes upon her dependant, she said, "You do not suppose, Harriet—you cannot think that I—I—caused the death of that man?"

"I am afraid to think, ma'am—I recoil from my own thoughts," returned Harriet, her tone and manner both acquiring firmness from actual despair: then, as if suddenly conquering repugnances until this moment invincible, and summoning all her resolution to her aid, the young woman exclaimed, "But there is no time to lose—and we must meet this embarrassment face to face!"

"Oh! thank you, thank you, Harriet—dear Harriet, for this change in your conduct towards me!" said the unhappy Mrs. Brace. "Tell me what we ought to do—I will place myself entirely in your hands—and your reward shall exceed all your expectations."

"It is impossible that you and I can dispose of the body alone," resumed Harriet, her courage and presence of mind appearing to gain strength in proportion as the feelings of her mistress underwent a painful reaction. "We must make a confidant of one of the men-servants," she added emphatically.

"O Harriet!" murmured Mrs. Brace, shocked at the thought of falling so completely into the power of her domestics: but the next moment an idea struck her—and she exclaimed, "If I mistake not, there is a tolerable good understanding between you and Frederick?"

"We keep company together, ma'am," observed Harriet: for the individual to whom Mrs. Brace had alluded, was one of the footmen belonging to that part of her establishment which looked upon St. James's Square.

"Listen, then, my dear girl," continued the milliner, who now rapidly recovered her own self-possession, inasmuch as she saw a means whereby the co-operation and silence of her lady's-maid and her footman could be alike secured. "About the person of the dead man there is no less than a sum of five hundred and fifty guineas, all of which he received from me."

For the reader will remember that in addition to the amount paid by the milliner for the services rendered by Grumley in the affair of Caroline Walters, fifty guineas had likewise been demanded by the constable as one of the conditions on which he liberated the Gallows' Widow from his custody.

"And that sum of which you speak, ma'am?" said Harriet, in a tone of inquiring eagerness, as her eyes sparkled with cupidity.

"Every farthing shall be yours as a wedding-dowry," replied Mrs. Brace; "and I will give Frederick a hundred guineas into the bargain. Do you not think he will be happy to marry you upon these terms?"

"Leave it to me to manage!" exclaimed the lady's-maid, her handsome countenance lighting up with exultation. "This very night shall the dead body be disposed of in such a way—— But time wears on," she cried, hastily interrupting herself, and glancing with a certain degree of reviving uneasiness at the bath-room door. "I will go at once and fetch Frederick to help us."

"But you will hurry back as soon as you can?—you will not keep me waiting here—*alone?*" said the milliner, shuddering at the reminiscences which swept through her mind and which made her soul recoil in horror from the mere thought of the diabolical dream that had characterised the preceding night.

"In five minutes I will return with Frederick, ma'am," said the lady's-maid;—and she hastened from the room.

But the instant Mrs. Brace thus found herself once more alone in the close vicinage of the corpse of her victim, a dreadful oppression came over her—the atmosphere of the chamber seemed hot as if laden with the steam of human blood—a strange humming sound stole upon her ears, as if the low voices of invisible spectres were repeating the tale of midnight murder—and ghastly countenances suddenly appeared to be looking forth upon her from the obscurity which enveloped the extremities of the apartment and from every nook where the furniture threw a sombre shadow.

For upwards of a minute did she remain standing in the middle of the room, struggling against the awful feeling of uneasiness which was thus gaining upon her; but so intolerable did it become that she opened the door leading into the passage and listened in anxious expectation of hearing the returning footsteps of Harriet accompanied by her lover. But all was still—all was silent as the grave; and then Mrs. Brace feared that some one was standing behind her! Re-entering the room, she approached the cupboard and poured herself out a glass of brandy:—but the creaking of the closet door on its hinges caused her to give so sudden a start that she spilt a portion of the liquor while conveying it to her lips. Nevertheless, she imbibed sufficient to animate her with that bastard courage which constitutes an armour wherewith to gird the guilty soul; and she repeated the dram in order to enhance that unnatural flow of spirits which was so suddenly excited within her. Yes: the burning alcohol had become her brazen coralet—her helm—and her shield, to defend her against the spectres of terror and the demons of remorse:—the fiery spirit which she had so copiously poured down her throat, became her armour of proof;—and she staggered beneath the weight of her panoply!

Then, experiencing a sensation of stifling heat, the milliner proceeded to take off her gown and unlace her stays; and assuming a loose wrapper, she even smiled at herself complacently in the mirror as she negligently fastened the flowing garment around her luxuriant and voluptuous shape.

But this sentiment of self-complacency, which was only the feverish fume of the alcohol, speedily yielded to a feeling of anxiety, and she wondered what could possibly detain Harriet so long!

CHAPTER CXXXVIII.

THE DISPOSAL OF THE CORPSE.

In the meantime Harriet had proceeded with light, quick, and noiseless step to the chamber of Frederick Dray, the junior of the two footmen in the employ of Mrs. Brace.

He was a young and handsome man—tall and well-formed—possessing good hair, eyes, and teeth—and entertaining by no means a bad opinion of his own qualifications, both personal and intellectual. Selfish and profligate, extravagant and unprincipled, treacherous and hypocritical, Frederick Dray was in reality a most dangerous character, although the worst features of his disposition had as yet received no opportunity of manifesting themselves in the household of Mrs. Brace. Thus, although Harriet was upon the utmost terms of intimacy with this individual, she was far from suspecting how thoroughly heartless he was, and how capable of any turpitude in order to enhance his own interests or further his own views!

On the particular night in question, he had not long ascended to his own chamber when a slight tap at the door announced the presence of the lady's-maid, who has already been described in the early part of our narrative as a fine handsome young woman, about twenty years of age.

Frederick, who had not begun to undress, was by no means astonished at this visit; and therefore the reader may rest assured that it was not the first time he had thus been favoured with the presence of Harriet in his bed-room at an hour when modesty would have blushed at the proceeding.

"Well, my dear girl," he said, in a tone half kind and half superciliously conceited, "you cannot do without me—eh? Must come to your Frederick's arms?—couldn't live a week away from him?"

"You know that I love you, Fred," she observed, going up to him as he sate upon his bed, and throwing her arm round his neck.

"Well, I am not astonished that you should like me a little," he exclaimed: "for I am not the ugliest fellow in the world—nor yet the greatest fool. But what is the matter with you, Harriet?" he demanded, observing that there was something singular, or at all events unusual, in the young woman's looks and manner.

"Frederick," she said, not exactly replying to his question, "you are aware that I shall not be able to conceal my position much longer. Will you not fulfil your promise—and—and marry me, without farther delay?"

"It is all very easy, my girl, to talk of marriage," responded the conceited footman; "but where the devil is the money to come from? 'Tis true that I get good wages and pick up many perquisites and presents in this house: but I don't know how the deuce it is, the money does run away so fast——"

"Because you are so very, very extravagant, Fred," interrupted Harriet. "However, I do not mean to reproach you," she added, assuming her most coaxing and endearing manner: "for I am very fond of you—and I know that if you had the means, you would fulfil your promise and marry me."

"Well, I don't know but what I might," said the young man: "that is to say," he added, with a look of extreme animal grossness, "if I was sure that the child which you are soon to bring forth, is really my own."

"I take God to witness my oath that it is!" ejaculated Harriet, her countenance flushing with excitement.

"Come, you needn't put yourself into a rage, my dear," said her paramour, with the most haughty indifference: "for you are very well aware that I was not the first—nor the second——"

"But you know that I have remained faithful to you, Fred, from the moment that you began to pay your addresses to me," interrupted Harriet, the tears starting into her eyes; "and it is not generous to reproach me for the past—particularly as I never attempted to deceive you on that score. I admitted that Lord Montgomery had seduced me in the first instance, and that Lord Fleetwood had afterwards been intimate with me: but none other save yourself——"

"Well, well—we won't quarrel about it, Harriet," exclaimed the footman. "Come—begin to undress——"

"Oh! but you have not yet answered my question," interrupted the young woman, impatiently. "I wish to know whether you would marry me, if we had enough money to set us up in housekeeping?"

"You really begin to make me suspect that you have either picked up a purse or found a treasure in some nook," said the man-servant; "or else one of your former lovers has promised to give you a dowry. Come—which is it?"

"And suppose it really was something of the sort?" exclaimed Harriet, with an arch smile which displayed her fine teeth and made her large blue eyes look roguish as well as naturally wanton.

"The truth is, my dear girl," responded the self-sufficient footman, caressing his whiskers,—"and I may as well relieve you of all suspense at once,—I have vowed within myself that I will never bestow my hand upon any young woman who cannot show me a dowry of five hundred guineas. So now there can be no misunderstanding between us."

"Not at all!" ejaculated the lady's-maid, overjoyed at the manner in which the conversation was now progressing. "To come to the point at once, then, I can put you in the way of obtaining five hundred and fifty guineas this very night—and if you keep your promise and marry me, Mrs. Brace will give you a hundred more."

"Mrs. Brace! What has she got to do with the matter?" demanded Frederick Dray, turning an incredulous look upon his handsome mistress.

"Oh! I will explain everything in a moment," she replied: "but give me the promise——"

"Well—I swear to marry you upon those conditions," exclaimed the footman. "Indeed, I shall be most happy to do so, and shan't consider that I'm flinging myself away. But what is required of me in order to earn the five hundred and fifty guineas?—and what the devil has our mis'ess to do with the affair?"

"Listen—and don't start with astonishment, because you'll frighten me—nor yet cry out, because you'll alarm the house. But the truth is," continued the abigail, her tone suddenly becoming serious and her manner solemn, "a man has died of apoplexy in Mrs. Brace's bed-room—and the corpse must be disposed of this very night!"

"No!—is this possible, Harriet?" were the ejacu

lations which burst from the lips of the astounded Frederick Dray: but instantly perceiving how tremendous was the hold which the knowledge of such a secret gave him over Mrs. Brace, he hastened to observe, "My dear Harriet, I am ready to devote myself body and soul for our poor mis'sus—— who promises five hundred and fifty guineas——"

"We must not waste time in chattering here, Fred," exclaimed the abigail: "indeed, I have already been more than a quarter of an hour absent—and I promised to return in five minutes. So follow me in silence!"

The footman started with alacrity to his feet; and Harriet led the way cautiously back to Mrs. Brace's bed-chamber, into which she introduced her companion, closing the door with the utmost care.

The milliner who had grown nervously impatient despite of the exhilarating influence of the brandy, was much pleased when she beheld the re-appearance of her faithful abigail in company with the footman. Harriet, who knew her mistress well, immediately perceived that she had been seeking artificial courage in the bottle; but Frederick Dray was not a little astonished to observe that the milliner wore so cheerful a countenance under such horrifying and embarrassing circumstances.

However, there was little leisure for making observations with the eyes and none for expressing irrelevant ones with the lips: for Harriet hastened to inform her mistress that she had acquainted Frederick with what had happened, and that he was willing and ready to lend all the assistance in his power. Mrs. Brace thereupon opened the door of the bath-room, and taking the light in her hand, entered that place where the corpse of Peter Grumley was lying.

A cold tremor passed over Harriet's frame, and she averted her eyes shudderingly as Frederick Dray calmly and deliberately proceeded to remove the cloth which the milliner had thrown over the face of the dead body.

"Why—it's the Bow Street Officer, I declare!" exclaimed the footman, after surveying the livid countenance of the murdered man: and he turned his eyes with an expression of mingled amazement and incredulity upon Mrs. Brace, his looks and manner both implying a suspicion that there was something more in this affair than had been communicated to him.

"Come—we have no time to lose," said Mrs. Brace, with a full recurrence of all that nervous trepidation which she had chased away by means of the brandy. "The money I have promised you is in the man's pockets—you can secure it at once," she hastened to observe; for she did not altogether like the looks which Frederick Dray had thrown upon her, and her guilty conscience naturally suggested the idea that he had penetrated the secret of the murder.

"Here is the money, safe enough," said he, after searching the dead man's pockets;—and securing the bank-notes about his own person, he demanded of Mrs. Brace whether she had any settled plan respecting the disposal of the corpse.

"My idea was to bury it beneath the pavement in the back kitchen," responded the milliner.

"Capital!" ejaculated Dray: "it is the best course to adopt—and singular enough, the dustman left his shovel by accident behind him a few days ago and has never called for it since. Come—lend me a hand with the body, and we will carry him down stairs as gently as possible."

Thus speaking, the footman raised the corpse up to a sitting posture; and stooping down behind it, he wound his arms about the burly form, while Harriet, who had by this time regained her presence of mind, lifted up the feet. Mrs. Brace threw the cloth once more over the head of her victim; and carrying the light in her hand, she led the way from the bath-room.

Through her bed-chamber was the corpse thus borne—and down the stairs was it conveyed as noiselessly as possible. Frederick Dray was a young man of extraordinary strength and muscular power; and he sustained nearly the entire weight of the heavy inanimate mass of human clay, Harriet merely supporting the feet in the descent. Often did they pause to listen whether any one besides themselves was moving in the house; and sometimes, when the staircase creaked or Frederick unavoidably staggered against the balusters, a mortal terror struck to the hearts of the two women lest the whole dwelling should be alarmed by the sounds. As for the footman *himself*, *he* took the entire proceeding with remarkable coolness and managed it in such a perfectly business-like way that had he been a resurrection-man he could not have exhibited a more complete indifference at the handling of a dead body. But although this cold and imperturbable disposition was the very one to enlist in such a matter, it was likewise that which was most to be dreaded afterwards;—and this idea struck like a pang to the brain of Mrs. Brace as she led the way with the candle in her hand.

At length the bottom of the staircase was reached—and now the descent of the flight leading to the kitchen was begun. This was more difficult because the steps were precipitate: but in a few minutes the task was accomplished, and the corpse was deposited upon the pavement of the back kitchen.

A bottle of wine was now procured from the cellar; and, invigorated by the generous juice of the grape, Frederick resumed his labours. By means of a poker which was worn away almost to a point, he succeeded in raising one of the flagstones wherewith the back kitchen was paved; and the shovel which the dustman had left behind now became serviceable in digging out the earth. The young man toiled arduously: the perspiration streamed off him—and Mrs. Brace and Harriet, who watched him with profound interest, were both astonished at the progress which he made. From time to time he paused to rest and refresh himself with a glass of wine; and then, as if inspired by renewed fervour, he returned to his task with the resolute determination of a man working for a wager.

And Frederick Dray's thoughts were all the while as active as his arms. He knew that it only required one good chance in the life of a man to enable him to make his fortune; and such an opportunity had presented itself to him this night. The milliner was rich—and she was now completely in his power: for he had indeed penetrated as profoundly into the truth of the matter as she had feared and suspected. But he toiled hard to clear away all traces of her crime, because it was by no means consistent with his own interests that it should be brought to light: on the contrary, it was a

secret which he was most anxious to surround with as many defences as possible, so that he alone should be enabled to hold it in terror over the head of the unhappy woman!

Such were his reflections as he plied the spade with all the vigour of his muscular arms: but the task was by no means an easy one. For the soil was very hard—he had not the requisite implements to break it up ere he shovelled it out—and it was moreover necessary to dig to a great depth in order that a sufficiency of earth might cover the corpse so as to prevent any disagreeable odour from exhaling hereafter.

Three hours therefore elapsed before the grave was hollowed to receive the murdered man,—three mortal hours, during which both Mrs. Brace and Harriet passed through all the torturing transitions of lively alarm, cold terror, profound apprehension, and awful suspense. Sometimes they fancied they heard noises in the house—footsteps descending the stairs—persons breathing in the passage communicating with the front kitchen—or windows opening in the upper rooms;—and then their hair almost stood on end and the perspiration burst forth in large and ice-cold drops upon their foreheads. At other moments they would goad themselves to desperation with the thought that Frederick could not possibly complete his task before morning—that even if he were able, the trace of the deed would not be altogether annihilated—that some clue must inevitably remain, and that detection was sure to follow. Then Mrs. Brace on the one hand fancied that she already found herself arraigned at the bar of justice as a murderess; while Harriet in imagination saw herself accused as an accessory after the fact. For although the abigail believed her mistress's representation that the constable had died of apoplexy, she nevertheless knew full well that were the corpse discovered in the grave which Frederick was digging to receive it, the dread cry of murder would be instantaneously raised.

Yes—three mortal hours thus passed, during which the murderess of mature age and the young woman in the bloom of youth were tortured with all the poignant imaginings of their fevered fancies. And they dared not express to each other how tensely their feelings were thus wrung—much less suffer Frederick Dray to observe how excruciating were their thoughts. For they were fearful of imparting their own terrors to him, thereby paralysing the only arm which could now work to save them: but the furtive glances which they stole at each other met at last and revealed to each how profoundly they were both suffering.

But at length the grave was dug—and the two women assisted Frederick to ascend from its depth. The corpse of the Bow Street Officer was then rolled into the hole; and the young man addressed himself to the task of shovelling back the earth which he had thrown up in two great mounds, one on each side of the grave. Every now and then he leaped into the hollow to trample down the soil; and the nearer its surface grew towards the level of the pavement, the more easily did Mrs. Brace and Harriet appear to breathe.

The clock struck four as the footman trod down the last layer of earth; for the grave was now full—and still a large quantity of the soil remained heaped up by the side. But Fredrick seemed fully prepared to encounter every embarrassment which presented itself—and such an one as this was naturally foreseen by him from the very first. Having procured a large sheet, he spread it out upon the floor—threw the superfluous soil upon it—gathered up the four corners—and thus converted it into a sort of sack, which he was enabled to carry upon his shoulders. He then passed cautiously out into the back yard, and emptied the contents of the sheet into the privy. This operation he had to perform three times before the whole of the superfluous soil was fully disposed of.

He was now well nigh exhausted: the frequent applications he made to Mrs. Brace's excellent wine, had hitherto sustained him throughout his arduous labours;—but the effect of the artificial stimulant was beginning to produce a rapid reaction, and it was necessary to imbibe a considerable quantity ere he could muster energy sufficient to re-place the huge stone over the mouth of the grave. This portion of the task was however accomplished at length; while Harriet compounded a mixture of white-lead, sand, and earth, which she reduced by means of oil to the consistency of putty, and with which the flag-stone was not only fixed in its setting, but the interstices were filled up.

The back-kitchen was now swept carefully with a carpet-broom; and Frederick walked several times over the stone, treading upon it in every point, to assure himself that it was firmly placed and did not tremble beneath the feet. The result of this test was perfectly satisfactory; and thus had every trace of the crime disappeared!

The clock of St. James's church was striking five, as Mrs. Brace, Harriet, and Frederick Dray quitted the place where they had buried the corpse of the police-constable; and, retiring noiselessly to their respective chambers, they were all speedily plunged by sheer exhaustion into a profound slumber.

CHAPTER CXXXIX.

THE TWO NOBLEMEN.

A WEEK had elapsed since the occurrences just related, and it was about eleven in the forenoon that the handsome but effeminate young Lord Florimel was seated in the breakfast-parlour at his elegant mansion in Piccadilly.

He was dressed in the negligent attire of a robe-de-chambre and slippers; and he was perusing a tender note which he had just received from Pauline Clarendon, who was still staying at the Duchess of Devonshire's villa near Aylesbury. The communication spoke favourably in respect to poor Octavia, and contained the most fervent assurances of the fair writer's unchanging love for the young nobleman.

Florimel was already in the midst of his second perusal of this note, when the door was opened gently and a black page entered the room.

This sable menial was apparently between fourteen and fifteen years of age. Of low stature and slender shape, his form was nevertheless of a symmetry alike elegant and graceful; and his movements were as noiseless as if he were an aerial being. Though his skin was as black as an African's, yet in his features had he nothing characteristic of the negro race. On

the contrary, his hair, which was curled in a myriad small ringlets over his shoulders, was of silken fineness; and his facial outline was delicate and pretty. His eyes were large and sparkled with intelligence; and his beautiful teeth gleamed like pearls between the lips which were rather full, but of a lively red. His hands were delicate and even girlish in their appearance—for the fingers were long and exquisitely tapered, and the fine almond-shaped nails were of a pellucid roseate tint.

But although the fire of intellect sparkled in the eyes of this boy, who appeared to belong to some East Indian race, yet were his manners so subdued that it was impossible to converse with him many minutes without receiving the impression that he was either of a sullen and morose disposition, or that he had some profound grief preying upon his mind. He spoke English perfectly: but his replies were always given in the fewest words, and in monosyllables if possible. He was nevertheless active and willing in the performance of his duties; and there was something almost amounting to the mysterious in the manner in which he glided in and out of the rooms with his tread so light and noiseless.

Such was the strange but interesting boy that now entered the breakfast-parlour where Lord Florimel was seated: but he did not open his lips until the young nobleman, hearing the door close very gently, raised his eyes and beheld the sable page.

"Well, Rao?" he said, inquiringly.

"Lord Montgomery, may it please your lordship," returned the boy, in a low and silvery voice, his form bending slightly but with a graceful inclination at the same time.

"Show his lordship in, Rao," exclaimed Florimel. "You should not have made him wait in the hall."

"I am sorry, my lord," responded the boy, in the same low, quiet, and harmonious voice; "and I will not do it again."

"You are a good youth, Rao," said the young nobleman, in a kind tone.

The black page acknowledged this compliment with a more perceptible inclination of his slender form; and, gliding from the room, he almost immediately returned to usher in Earl Montgomery.

This nobleman, whose name has already been more than once mentioned in our narrative, was about thirty years of age. His countenance was a perfect specimen of manly beauty, the facial outline being of the pure Greek form, and the fire of the large dark eyes being only subdued by the long jetty lashes which shaded them. His brows were grandly arched; and his fine forehead seemed fitted to serve as the throne of the noblest thoughts: but there was a certain expression about the mouth which somewhat nullified the effect of the upper part of the countenance. Yet that mouth was perfect as a feature—small, with lips neither too thin nor too full—and furnished with teeth white and pure as those of a charming woman. Nevertheless there was at times a certain cast—or rather a mingled wreathing and compression of those lips—which gave a sinister look to the whole countenance and thus marred the open, frank, and generous aspect of the noble forehead and the magnificent brows. It must however have been a tolerably acute observer to notice this effect; and thus to the world in general Lord Montgomery's countenance appeared to combine every essential to perfect manly beauty.

His hair was black, curling naturally, and shining with so rich a gloss of its own, as to render needless the unguents of perfumers; and he possessed a superb pair of whiskers which were slightly tinged with a dark auburn at the roots, but speedily grew into a black as jetty and as bright as the hair. His stature was of the middling height; and his form combined graceful symmetry with muscular power. He dressed well—had a rich melodious voice—sang an excellent song—was a famous horseman—had a taste for literature and wrote beautiful poetry—danced gracefully—fenced admirably—was considered to be somewhat addicted to all kinds of fashionable dissipation—and was therefore a great favourite both with the male and female portions of the aristocratic world.

Such was Lord Montgomery—a British peer, with an estate tolerably well encumbered by mortgages, and whose signature was by no means unknown amongst the bill-discounters in the city: but he was wont to profess great confidence as to the law-suit which was pending in Chancery with regard to the Bellenden estates, and in the result of which process he had no mean interest.

Rao, the black page, having duly ushered Lord Montgomery into the presence of his master, immediately retired; and the greetings which took place between the two noblemen indicated the very friendly terms whereon they stood with each other.

"We have been quite strangers lately, my dear Gabriel," said the Earl, taking a seat; "and, therefore I was resolved to call upon you thus early this morning, and have a friendly confabulation."

"No one could possibly be more welcome, Eugene," returned Florimel. "And how progresses the law-suit?"

"Favourably enough, I think—and indeed, I hope," observed Lord Montgomery. "Heaven knows it is pretty nearly time that it should be decided in one way or another, considering that it has now lasted no less than thirty years."

"But how, in the name of common sense, can it have been thus protracted?" demanded Lord Florimel.

"In the first place, my dear friend," responded Montgomery, "every one knows that it is much more easy to get into Chancery than to get out of it. A more infamous tribunal never disgraced civilization, the Inquisition perhaps being alone excepted. Well, then, the delays of that accursed court have been the prominent and inevitable enemies against which we have had to contend. In the second place there has been an almost endless trouble in settling the precise manner in which the suits were to be carried on: because there were numerous old wills to consult, pedigrees to examine, marriage-settlements to rake up, certificates of birth to find, and registers of burial to ferret out, before it could be established who ought to be the exact claimants."

"But I thought that the suits were renewed, after a temporary suspension, by your mother on behalf of yourself and your brother Raymond, when you were both boys?" said Lord Florimel inquiringly.

"Your surmise is substantially correct, my dear friend," returned Lord Montgomery. "The process was originally commenced by my father thirty years ago, which was just about the time of my birth. My brother Raymond was born eight years later——"

"What! is he only twenty-two at this moment?" exclaimed Florimel. "I thought he was at least a couple of years older: but then my acquaintance with him is very slight."

"Well, as I was observing," continued Lord Montgomery, hastily resuming the thread of his narrative, and not pausing to notice Florimel's remarks,—"the suit had lasted eight years when my brother Raymond was born; and almost at the same time my father died. Then it was discovered that by some testamentary privilege or peculiarity of entail, the claim to the Warwickshire estates had become vested in Raymond; while my own claims, although the elder son, regarded only the Priory with its annexed property. Scarcely did the lawyers ferret out these facts from the depths of mouldy documents and musty pedigrees, when it suddenly transpired that the Aylmer family had likewise some vague and indistinct claims upon a portion of the Warwickshire property; and thus the whole affair presented a curious but not the less bewildering imbroglio."

"And all this time the Marquis of Bellenden was in possession and enjoyment of the whole property—was he not?" inquired Florimel.

"Precisely so," answered Montgomery: "and as he was an amorous old fellow of sixty-two, my mother hit upon a method of settling the law disputes amicably and to the satisfaction of all parties concerned. She had an orphan niece dwelling with her—a beautiful girl named Laura; and she negotiated a marriage between this lovely creature and the sexagenarian Marquis of Bellenden. The alliance took place; and the documents were drawn up to the effect that, in default of male issue, all the disputed estates should become the property of our family at the death of the Marquis,—the Aylmers consenting to receive a sum of ready money as an inducement to waive all their claims. But, behold! the Marquis died suddenly, before the deeds were signed; and confusion became worse confounded. The widowed Marchioness—my beau-

tiful cousin Laura—evinced so decided a spirit of her own that my mother could not bring her to any terms, nor induce her to listen to reason; and the law-suits were accordingly renewed, as you just now expressed yourself, after the temporary suspension."

"And that renewal took place twenty years ago—did it not?" inquired Florimel.

"Yes—and consequently when I was ten years old and my brother Raymond two," said Earl Montgomery. "Our mother revived the process on our behalf; and its slow length has been dragged along until the present time, my cousin the Marchioness fighting us step by step."

"Did the Aylmers renounce their claims upon that portion of the Warwickshire property to which they had considered themselves entitled?" asked Lord Florimel.

"The affairs of the Aylmer family soon afterwards fell into such confusion," replied Eugene Montgomery, "and death made such havoc amongst its members, that every claim seemed to be abandoned in that quarter; and the only representative of that family who was at last left, was a female infant of whom the Earl of Desborough took charge. This child grew up——"

"Ah—your cousin Fernanda Aylmer?" exclaimed Lord Florimel.

"Or rather Lady Holderness," said Montgomery. "Well, within the last few months she has asserted her right to the portion of the Warwickshire estates previously claimed by her family; and thus the Aylmers and Montgomeries are once more battling with the Bellenden. Do you now comprehend the position of this very intricate affair?"

"Perfectly, my dear friend," answered Lord Florimel: "you never explained it to me so lucidly and minutely before. But if you, your brother Raymond, and Lady Holderness all three succeed in these suits, the Marchioness of Bellenden will be completely stripped of all her possessions?"

"Except the income which she derives from a certain sum in the funds, and which produces her about two thousand a-year," said Lord Montgomery.

"And do you really expect that you will all three succeed in the law suits?" asked Florimel.

"I confess that I am very sanguine," returned Lord Montgomery. "My brother Raymond's rights to the Warwickshire estates are all but proven; and Fernanda will not experience much difficulty in making good the validity of her claims. But my case, which refers, you must remember, to the Priory property,—is a little more complex. However, the Lord Chancellor must decide upon the matter soon; and I shall be truly glad when all suspense is over."

"I can well believe you, my dear Eugene," said Lord Florimel. "For my part, I would not have a law-suit for the world."

"And yet there are scarcely any title-deeds which do not contain some flaw or leave some opening for quibble and dispute," observed Montgomery, "Indeed, some persons hold and enjoy large estates without possessing any title-deeds at all: for through the habit of entrusting such documents to one's solicitor, they are frequently lost or destroyed by accident——"

"And sometimes intentionally, no doubt," added Florimel. "But I keep all my papers and parchments in a tin-box under my bed——Ah! what do you want, Rao?" demanded the young nobleman, suddenly interrupting himself to address that question to his black page, who had glided with his usual noiseless step into the room, where he had indeed remained unperceived for upwards of a minute.

The sable youth made no verbal reply, but handed his master a letter upon a silver salver: he then bowed and withdrew as silently as he had entered.

"How long have you had that page, Gabriel?" inquired Lord Montgomery as soon as the door closed behind the object of this query.

"Only a week," answered the young nobleman.

"I hope you had good references with him," said Montgomery.

"Why so?" demanded Florimel, surprised at the observation.

"Oh! I don't know—'twas an idea which entered my head at the time," exclaimed Montgomery. "But the truth is, I do not like that noiseless way of gliding imperceptibly in and out of a room; and that boy made me almost shudder at the moment, as if it were a black snake creeping in with so much sinister mystery."

"Such a prejudice against poor Rao is ridiculous, Eugene," cried Florimel, in a tone of remonstrance: "and if we were not intimate friends, I should really feel indignant at the unjust suspicion which your words imply."

"Well, let us change the subject, my dear fellow," said Montgomery. "What have you got there?" he inquired, as Florimel opened the letter which had been brought in.

"A card for a masquerade at Covent Garden Theatre," replied the young nobleman. "Who on earth could have sent me this?" he exclaimed, turning the card over and over in his hands.

"Is there nothing written inside the envelop?" asked Lord Montgomery.

"Nothing," said Florimel. "And the address outside is evidently penned in a feigned hand," he added, scrutinizing the superscription with attention. "But I have not the least knowledge of this writing—not the remotest suspicion——"

"And yet the writer must be afraid of her penmanship being detected," remarked Lord Montgomery: "or else wherefore should she attempt to disguise it?"

"It is strange—very strange," said Florimel, in a musing tone and with his eyes still fixed upon the envelop. "The handwriting is evidently that of a lady, who has tortured its natural fluency into a stiff and awkward scrawl."

"An intrigue is at the bottom of this proceeding," observed Lord Montgomery: "and you must go to the masquerade. Doubtless you have captivated the heart of some lady who mingles discretion with her gallantry and conducts her amours with precaution; and she has therefore adopted these means of obtaining an interview with you. For my part—— But, by Jove! here is the black page again!"

And Montgomery actually shuddered as he beheld Rao gliding noiselessly into the apartment like a black spirit.

The boy stopped suddenly short as the speculation struck upon his ear; and his black eyes, after darting a keen and penetrating look upon the nobleman who had uttered it, swept towards Lord Florimel, on whose countenance they remained fixed for a few moments: then as if satisfied by this scrutiny, or

relieved from some apprehension which had started up in his mind, the sable youth resumed his noiseless course, and approaching his master, he placed a large parcel upon the table before him.

"Well, Rao—what is this?" demanded Florimel, perceiving that the youth had something to say but did not choose to speak until questioned.

"It was delivered, my lord, at the same time with the letter," said the boy, in his subdued tone of musical cadence; "but the hall-porter forgot to give it to me."

"And who brought the letter and this parcel?" inquired Florimel.

"A ticket-porter, who immediately departed, my lord," was the boy's response.

Rao then retired, Earl Montgomery following him with his eyes until he disappeared by the door which it seemed he had a knack of opening and shutting in a manner as noiseless as his own footsteps.

"What have you got now, Gabriel?" inquired the Earl, turning towards his young friend, who was opening the large brown paper parcel which had just been brought in.

"A blue domino, by heavens!" ejaculated Florimel, unfolding the ample garment, which was edged with a peculiar braiding and had a sort of star made of the same material upon the crown of the hood.

"The fair unknown whose heart you have captivated," said Montgomery, "is determined that the adventure shall be as completely romantic and as well defended by judicious precautions as possible. You are to wear this domino in order that she may recognise you at the masquerade for which she has sent you a card; and the costume is purposely signalised with braiding in such a manner that no mistake may arise, even should there be a dozen blue dominos in the room. You are a fortunate fellow, Gabriel," added Earl Montgomery: "for all these precautions and the evident anxiety which exists to shroud the adventure in as profound a secrecy as possible, naturally lead us to infer that the fair unknown is some lady of exalted rank and untarnished reputation. Altogether, the intrigue promises to be of a piquancy sufficient to move an anchorite."

"And yet I shall not keep the appointment nor accept the overtures thus mysteriously made," said Lord Florimel, whose manner had gradually fallen into a strange abstraction.

"Not keep the appointment!—not accept the overtures!" echoed Montgomery, with the most unfeigned astonishment. "Are you in earnest, Florimel?—or have you so little faith in my friendship and discretion, that you are afraid I shall betray you to the beautiful Miss Pauline Clarendon?"

"Those are not my reasons, Eugene," said the young nobleman, in a very serious tone: "but I will unhesitatingly admit, even at the risk of being well laughed at by you, that I am resolved—indeed, I have sworn—never to commit an act of perfidy towards Pauline. Therefore, my dear Eugene, I shall not take any further notice of the overtures whereby I have been honoured; and if you really value my friendship, you will not make the slightest attempt to dissuade me from my purpose. Poor Pauline! she loves me so devotedly—and she has latterly experienced so much affliction on account of her father's inauspicious marriage and other circumstances of a domestic nature, that I could not find it in my heart to plunge headlong into this intrigue, even though I were certain that it would never reach her ears."

"After all you have said, my dear Gabriel," cried Lord Montgomery, "I cannot do otherwise than respect your decision. At the same time, I most sincerely wish that such an adventure would offer itself to me. By Jove! nothing could be more amusing—nothing more exciting! I suppose you would not like the idea of allowing me to assume that blue domino and take your place at the approaching masquerade?"

"My dear Eugene, such a proposal is unworthy of you," said Lord Florimel, in a tone of grave remonstrance. "Would it be honourable to the lady in question, whoever she may be——"

"I was only joking, Gabriel," interrupted the Earl, who nevertheless bit his lip with vexation. "Of course this is a secret which you must keep religiously and as a man of honour. But wherefore are you thus serious?—and why is your air so preoccupied? There is evidently something on your mind besides the present topic of conversation."

"To speak candidly," said Lord Florimel, after nearly a minute's profound silence and deep meditation, "the overtures conveyed by that masquerade-ticket and the blue domino, have reminded me of an adventure which occurred fifteen months ago, before my brother's sudden death conferred upon me the family title and estates. The adventure to which I allude was of a most extraordinary character; and I could not help just now associating it somewhat with the present overtures—although there is not any substantial ground to warrant the supposition that the lady concerned in the former affair is the same who has sent me the masquerade-card and the blue costume."

"And that adventure of which you are speaking," said Lord Montgomery, whose curiosity was excited,—"is it a secret? or may I without indiscretion beg you to relate it?"

"I do not think that there can be any breach of honour on my part in making you acquainted with the singular occurrence," returned Florimel: "especially as no pledge of secrecy was exacted from me at the time, and no particular lady's reputation can possibly suffer by the narrative."

"Pray proceed: I am all attention," said Lord Montgomery, drawing his chair closer to that of his young friend.

"You are aware, my dear Eugene," began Florimel, "that as my late brother was unmarried and was of an exceedingly nervous temperament, I dwelt with him in this house after I left College; and although he exercised a species of parental espionage over me, as he was so much older than myself, yet I deemed it a duty to bestow as much of my time and attention upon him as possible. One day we received an invitation to a grand entertainment which was to take place at Devonshire House; and much as my brother disliked the bustle, brilliancy, and splendid confusion of such fêtes, he nevertheless felt himself bound to be present at this one, inasmuch as her Grace of Devonshire is related to our family. Thither we accordingly repaired on the appointed evening; and the magnificent saloons were already crowded with the *élite* of fashion when we were announced. In a short time the heat of the rooms became overpowering, despite the vases of refreshing perfume which stood in the corners of the apartments, and the green-house plants and flowers which were profusely arranged around the landing-places and in the brilliantly-lighted

passages: for it was in the middle of winter that this entertainment was given. Towards midnight my brother suffered so much from the intensity of the heat that he was compelled to return home the instant the carriage, which had been ordered to attend early, was announced: but he would not permit me to accompany him. On the contrary, he bade me remain and enjoy myself until the end; and he observed that although he should send back the carriage to wait for me, I need not be in any hurry on that account. I thanked him for his kind consideration—assisted him into the carriage—and then returned to the ball-rooms, where I entered fully into the spirit of the scene. It was about two o'clock in the morning that the company began to break up; and then commenced in the adjacent streets all that confusion, noise, bustle, and din which invariably attend upon the vast muster of carriages on such an occasion. The hall and the grand entrance of the ducal mansion were crowded with the guests waiting for the announcement of their respective equipages; —the footmen were bawling out for the carriages which were in requisition—the link-boys repeated the cries—the coachmen responded from all directions—and these vociferations were mingled with the crashing sounds of wheels and the tramplings of horses' hoofs. At that moment there could not have been less than five or six hundred carriages in the vicinage of Devonshire House; and the arrangements to marshal and muster them appeared to have been singularly neglected. I had undertaken to escort Lady Bonnycastle and her daughter; and, having after some difficulty succeeded in getting up their barouche to the gate, I had just handed them in and bowed the parting salutation, when, as their carriage was whirled away, another dashed up to the entrance. '*Who's next?*' demanded the stentorian voice of the porter of Devonshire House.—'*Lord Florimel's carriage!*' replied a tall footman in dark livery, springing down from behind the vehicle which had just driven up and opening the door with alacrity.—'*That is not my brother's carriage,*' I exclaimed, the hasty glance which I threw at it convincing me there must be some mistake.—'*All right, sir! This is for the Honourable Mr. Florimel,*' said the tall footman in dark livery, touching his hat: and before I could utter another syllable or ask a word of explanation, I was lifted as it were by the fellow's vigorous arm up the steps into the vehicle—the door was banged—I became suddenly enveloped in total darkness—and the abrupt jerk with which the carriage whirled away threw me completely back upon the seat. At that moment my hand came in contact with the silken skirt of a female dress; and before even an ejaculation of astonishment could escape my lips, I was clasped in the arms of a lady whose warm cheek instantaneously came in contact with my own—whose bosom heaved against my chest —and whose voice, tremulous with mingled fervour and triumph, whispered in my ear, '*Fear nothing, Florimel—and pardon one who loves you!*'—Then, returning the ardour of the embrace in which I was so suddenly caught and so firmly locked, I gave back the impassioned kisses which were the next moment lavished upon me; and for many minutes not another word was spoken inside that vehicle."

"You gave back the kisses," said Lord Montgomery, laughing; "and it might have been some old woman who had adopted this stratagem to win you to her arms."

"Oh! believe me, my dear Eugene," exclaimed Florimel, "that although the darkness of the tomb prevailed within that carriage—for the wooden blinds were all drawn up,—yet no sooner did I come in contact with that warm and glowing form—no sooner did I feel the firm plump bosom heaving in its rich luxuriance against my breast—and no sooner did I taste as it were the luscious moisture of the lips and drink in the fragrance of the balmy breath,—Oh! no sooner, I say, was I thus suddenly plunged into the sweets of paradise, than I became well aware that such raptures emanated only from the companionship of a most desirable woman. And abandoning myself to the thrilling and ecstatic feelings which were inspired alike by her impassioned ardour and by the charming novelty of this adventure, I became intoxicated as it were with the perfume of voluptuousness which stole upon my senses as a delicious dream sheds its influence upon the mind. Nothing could equal the intense fervour of those caresses which my companion lavished upon me in the midst of that pitchy darkness: her kisses were long, burning, and devouring—as if she threw her whole soul into the profound sensuousness of her enjoyment. And when I gave back those caresses, she strained me to her bosom with all the indomitable fervour of her maddened desire—and with a violence which even hurt me, but which she had no power to control: while, beneath the influence of the kisses which I imprinted upon her lips, I felt her whole form twist, writhe, and undulate as it were in my arms like a silken cord that is shaken. For there was something even ferocious in the desires of that woman—something furious and raging in the headlong whirl of her passions!"

"By heaven! this is one of the most extraordinary adventures I ever heard," exclaimed Lord Montgomery; "and if I did not know you so intimately, Gabriel, I should conceive that you were endeavouring to amuse me with a romance."

"I am telling you the exact truth, on my most solemn and sacred word of honour!" returned Lord Florimel.

"Such an asseveration is quite unnecessary, my dear friend," said Montgomery. "But pray proceed with your narrative: I am dying to learn the result."

"For some minutes," resumed the young nobleman, "I gave myself up entirely to the voluptuous enjoyment of that strange and mysterious adventure, as a man in a dream resolves to drink his fill of those elysian sweets into the midst of which his fancy wafts him. The darkness which prevailed was that of hell: but the pleasure which I enjoyed was that of paradise. And all this time the carriage was whirling rapidly along; and I neither cared nor took the trouble to conjecture whither it could be bearing me, or what was to be the issue of my adventure. The intoxicating cup of ineffable bliss was at my lips; and I abandoned myself to the delirious ecstasies of the draught, without pausing to reflect whether poison was mingled with its sweets. At length I said in a low murmuring whisper—for there was such a deep and absorbing mystery in this adventure, that it almost appeared to me as if loud-speaking would break the spell of pleasure and disenchant the glowing vision,—'*Beautiful unknown,*' I said, '*you have taught me the way to paradise: but the means you have adopted to entice me into this path of pleasure, have been somewhat of the most extraordinary*'—

If then, dear Florimel,' she replied, *' you consider that you owe me any obligation for this adventure, the only recompense I demand is that you will seek no explanation from my lips, and that you will yield a ready assent to any little arrangement which I may deem necessary to ensure the continued envelopment of our amour in the deepest, darkest, most impenetrable mystery.'*—And then she strained me with renewed fervour to her bosom and lavished upon me the tenderest caresses; and, inebriated by the floods of delight that were thus poured in unto my soul, I vowed in the most solemn manner to obey my fair unknown in all things, so long as she suffered me to enjoy the pleasure of her society. Soon afterwards the carriage stopped; and the nature of the precautions to which she had alluded now became apparent—for she tied a silk handkerchief over my eyes before even the domestic had time to open the door of the vehicle. We then alighted; and guided by her fair hand from which my own received a re-assuring pressure every moment, I was led hastily forward. A gate closed behind us—on we went—and it struck me that we were threading the gravel-walk of a garden or similar enclosure. In a couple of minutes we paused: my companion let go my hand for a moment—I heard a key turn in a lock—a door opened—my hand was again taken in the warm grasp that gave me a re-assuring pressure—we entered some building—and once more did the lady pause to shut and fasten the door behind us. She then conducted me up a staircase so thickly carpetted that even the clumsiest boots and the heaviest footsteps must have passed noiselessly over it;—and finally I was escorted along a passage into a chamber the atmosphere of which was warm and perfumed."

"And the handkerchief was removed from your eyes, doubtless," exclaimed Lord Montgomery; "and you beheld the charming heroine of your romantic adventure?"

"Oh! how erroneous are all your surmises, my dear friend!" cried Lord Florimel. "What! do you suppose that all the precautions which had hitherto been adopted to steep this amour in the profoundest mystery, were suddenly to cease and even be counteracted by allowing my eyes to gaze upon that woman who had studied to draw so impenetrable a veil around her frailty and screen her sensual enjoyments from the possibility of detection? No—no: the adventure progressed not in the manner which you have conjectured. The atmosphere of that chamber was warm: but the heat came from an invisible source—for there was neither fire nor lamp to throw even the faintest glimmer upon the pitchy darkness which prevailed in that boudoir of love and mystery. The handkerchief was indeed removed from my eyes: but there was not so much as a streak of light to indicate the position of the windows. No—the shutters must have been well closed or the curtains made of the thickest material: and yet the heat of the room was not stifling nor the atmosphere stagnant. It was a wholesome air, though warm and perfumed; and it seemed to breathe a soft sensuousness which made me picture to myself all the luxury of a chamber devoted to the mysteries of love. But I was not allowed much leisure for reflection or needless conjecture: for my companion conducted me to a sofa, on which we reclined ourselves—and an adjacent table supplied wine, a goblet of which she conveyed to my lips with her own hand. Then she led me towards a couch—and in a few minutes we were locked in each other's arms."

"Do you suppose that it was her own house, or some place which she had hired for the occasion?" asked Lord Montgomery, whose curiosity was piqued in a most lively manner.

"It is impossible to say," returned Florimel. "I am narrating to you everything just as the adventure occurred to me; and you are positively as capable of making your conjectures as I am myself. At all events I may observe that the lady was familiar enough with every nook, corner, and detail of the chamber to which she had thus conducted me; and if it were not her own, it is very certain that she must have often visited it before. It was large, and evidently furnished in a luxurious manner: the table stood between the sofa and the bed;—and near the head of the bed there was a large arm-chair, in which I remember depositing my clothes. But it is useless to enter into these details, inasmuch as the whole adventure defies conjecture, and its mystery will most probably be never unravelled. That some lady of rank experienced a caprice with regard to myself, and adopted those means of gratifying her transitory whim, is tolerably certain: but that I shall ever learn who she is or discover the house to which I was conducted on that memorable night, I do not imagine for a moment. Her precautions were certainly adopted with admirable effect; and so confident was she in their success, that she did not even seek to bind me by oaths or promises to secrecy in respect to the adventure itself. But the very nature of the precautions which she had taken, fully proved how imperious was the necessity for adopting them; and therefore we may safely suppose that it was some lady of no ordinary standing in society, or whose reputation was incalculably dear."

"And yet others must have been in her secret," exclaimed Lord Montgomery: "for the coachman who drove her carriage and the footman in attendance upon it, could not have done otherwise than obey special instructions;—and then there was most likely a lady's-maid in her confidence also——"

"Those ideas have suggested themselves to me more than once," interrupted Lord Florimel; "and I confess that I have been lost in amazement and perplexity when I have reflected upon the astounding fact that the unknown lady must have risked exposure at the hands of her servants while adopting such immense precautions to screen her identity from her lover! She could not put confidence in *me*: but she placed herself at the mercy of *her dependants!*"

"Strange inconsistency!" ejaculated Lord Montgomery. "But do you not remember the livery which her servants wore?—have you never since seen the same carriage?—could you obtain no information at Devonshire House whose equipage it was?"

"Your questions remind me, my dear Eugene," said Florimel, "that I have not yet made an end of my narrative. You will remember I informed you that it was about two o'clock in the morning when I was precipitated as it were into the midst of that romantic adventure, as a man may be suddenly hurled from a rock to be received upon a bed of roses in the abyss beneath. Well, our ride to the unknown dwelling did not occupy more than twenty minutes at the outside; and therefore by half-past two I was comfortably located in the voluptuous but dark boudoir

For about four hours did I there enjoy the companionship of the mysterious genius of the place. Oh! those four hours of intoxicating passion and elysian ecstasy! Often and often have I since asked myself whether it was a delicious dream or a bewildering reality. And that it was the latter I am well assured: for who that had experienced the raptures which it was my blessed fortune to enjoy, could possibly attribute them to a delusion? No—the thrilling ecstasy of those devouring kisses which were lavished upon me—the delicious contact of that full and voluptuous form which, naked and palpitating with the frenzied desires of a Bacchanal, I clasped in my arms—the burning moments of pleasure which I tasted in the embrace of that woman who imparted all the electricity of her own maddening passions to the soul of her lover,—Oh! these were not the phantasies of a vision, but the never-to-be-forgotten experiences of such a night of love, and mystery, and voluptuousness as only occurs once in the life-time of a man!"

"I would give ten years of my own existence to have been the hero of this adventure," said Lord Montgomery, surveying his friend with the most undisguised envy. "But let me hear the result—for I see that you have more yet to tell me."

"Indeed the narrative is nearly brought to a close," returned Lord Florimel: "for at the expiration of the four hours, which glided away as if they were only as many minutes——"

"But how could you tell what time it was?" demanded Montgomery.

"Because a clock, apparently belonging to some adjacent church or chapel, chimed the half-hour," said Florimel, in explanation; "and then my fair companion murmured in a plaintive voice that it was half-past six and that we must separate. Literally tearing myself from her arms, I rose and put on my apparel in the dark, while she herself likewise resumed her clothing in a hurried manner. She then blindfolded me once more—conducted me along the passage back to the staircase, which we descended—and thence led me forth into the enclosure, the gravel-walk of which we threaded in a profound silence. But she held *both* my hands clasped in her own; and I guessed that her motive was to prevent me from raising the handkerchief surreptitiously from my eyes and thereby obtaining even that indistinct view of surrounding objects which may be sometimes procured between six and seven o'clock on a morning in the middle of winter. But I should not have attempted to penetrate her secret or solve the mystery of who she might be and where I was—no, I should not have moved the handkerchief a hair's-breadth from my eyes, even if my hands had been free. For I experienced at the moment a boundless gratitude towards that lady who had chosen me as the object of her sensual phantasy and who had thereby led me to pass four hours and upwards in the paradise of her society! Therefore was it that when we passed out of the gate of the enclosure and I knew by the sounds of horses champing their bits that a carriage was in attendance,—therefore was it, I say, that I implored her in a deep and fervid whisper to grant me an early repetition of the pleasure which I had enjoyed.—'*Yes, dear Florimel,*' she murmured, also in a voice tremulous with the reminiscences of recent delights, '*we will soon meet again. I shall not fail to adopt measures to bring you to my arms once more!*'—And then she pressed both my hands with ineffable tenderness; and in the next moment I was lifted as it were into the carriage, I knew no doubt by the same vigorous arm which had performed a like feat at the gate of Devonshire House: the steps were raised rapidly—the door was closed with equal haste—and away, away was I whirled from the scene of that paradise of four hours' enjoyment!"

"And then you tore off the bandage—you looked out of the carriage window——" exclaimed Montgomery, actually exciting himself by the strength of the interest wherewith he allowed his friend's narrative to carry him away.

"Indeed, I did no such thing," interrupted Florimel: "and even if I had so instantaneously torn off the handkerchief, the proceeding would have been useless, as you shall presently learn. But the truth is that the moment I was thrown as it were upon the soft cushions of the carriage by that powerful arm which I had no doubt belonged to the tall lacquey who had previously served me in the same manner,—I fell into a deep but delicious reverie, in which I feasted my imagination with all the delights that I had just been enjoying in such blessed reality. At length I bethought myself that I was blindfolded; and starting from my profound meditations, I took off the handkerchief. The interior of the vehicle was of pitchy darkness; and I therefore knew that the wooden blinds must be drawn up. I endeavoured to open the one nearest to me: but it was fastened in its setting. I tried the one belonging to the other door—and my attempt was equally ineffectual. I felt in front of the carriage: but it was a barouche and had no windows there at all. Thus, my dear friend, do you perceive how completely baffled I should have been, had I obeyed any sudden impulse of the kind which you imagined to have seized upon me the moment I entered the vehicle. You likewise see how complete—how effectual—and yet how simple were the precautions adopted by that lady to screen herself from the knowledge of the man whom her phantasy had made the partner of her bed for four short hours!"

"The whole narrative is a perfect romance," exclaimed Montgomery: "I mean, in the intensity of its interest."

"Yes—and that interest is the more absorbing," said Florimel, "because the romance itself is one of real life. But I was going to bring my tale to a conclusion—and this can now be done in a few words. For in about twenty minutes from the time that I re-entered the carriage in the manner I have described, it stopped—and the door was opened by a tall man. But he was dressed in plain clothes—and the broad brim of his hat completely shaded his countenance; so that in fact he was not recognisable in the dim twilight of the misty winter-morning. A sudden impulse prompted me to retain possession of the handkerchief which had blindfolded my eyes and which might serve as a clue: but scarcely was the idea formed than it was discarded as mean, paltry, and contemptible to a degree. Moreover I experienced an instinctive feeling that by leaving it behind me in the vehicle, it would be regarded with all the significancy of a guarantee to the lady that I did not seek any unfair means of penetrating into that secret around which she had thrown the defences of so many precautions. These thoughts passed rapidly as light

ning through my brain at the instant that the door was opened; and springing forth from the carriage, I instinctively gazed up at the house to see where it was that it had stopped. That rapid glance showed me that I had been put down at the door of my own home; but it was not so rapid as to be able to turn and take a deliberate survey of the carriage which had brought me thither. For as I looked round, the baroucho was already dashing away—and in another moment it was lost to my view in the obscurity which still prevailed."

"But you caught a glimpse of the colour of that carriage?" exclaimed Lord Montgomery, inquiringly; "and you noticed whether there were armorial bearings upon the panels?"

"So far from having made any such observations," responded Florimel, "I should not have known the vehicle again, had I met it an hour afterwards. Nor would you have manifested a greater keenness of perception, had you been in my place: for when I was first thrust into the carriage at the gate of Devonshire House, the proceeding was so rapid and my confusion was so great that I had scarcely an instant to notice anything;—and again, when I alighted from the vehicle at the door of my own home, it glided away into the mist of the morning, quick as the glance which I sent after it. But if I dared hazard an opinion upon the subject—and if the slightest reminiscence did really remain on the point—then I should say that from the rapid and imperfect view which I had of the carriage when I was thrown as it were into it at the gate of Devonshire House, that it was a plain one and of a dark colour. But this may be all conjecture, and most likely is. I have now little more to say—and yet I will not omit a single detail, since you appear to be so interested in the narrative."

"I am indeed interested," exclaimed Lord Montgomery: "for it is altogether one of the most exciting, thrilling, and piquant adventures that I ever heard. But you had reached that point where you alighted from the carriage and it disappeared with such rapidity. What happened next?"

"Nothing very remarkable," returned Florimel, laughing: "I went up-stairs and sought my couch, where I slept soundly until the afternoon. I then rose, dressed myself, and descended to the breakfast-parlour, where I found my brother reading the newspaper. '*I hope you enjoyed yourself, Gabriel?*' he said, in a somewhat severe tone, as he eyed me suspiciously.—'*Very much,*' I answered, wondering what was uppermost in his mind.—'*But why did you send word that the carriage was not to return and fetch you away?*' he demanded, fixing his looks keenly upon me.—I started in amazement; for I had sent no such message at all. But the truth flashed to my mind in an instant; and I comprehended that my fair unknown must have been the authoress of that message countermanding *my brother's* carriage in order that *hers* might take its place and perform its part, as indeed it had so effectually done.—'*You have been in bad company, Gabriel,*' continued my brother, observing the changing colour of my cheeks and the emotion of my manner, and utterly mistaking the cause: nor did I choose to enlighten him upon the subject—but I allowed him to read me a long lecture on the impropriety of staying out until seven o'clock in the morning—and when he had concluded I hastened off to call at Devonshire House. For I will candidly confess that an invincible feeling of curiosity had by this time sprung up within me, subduing the chivalrous resolves which I had previously made never to seek to penetrate the mystery of the night's adventure;—and under the plea of leaving my card at the ducal residence, I made certain inquiries of the gate-keeper and the hall-porter, who had superintended the marshalling of the carriages when the party broke up. Those inquiries I of course instituted in a very guarded manner; and I was even enabled, in consequence of my intimacy and relationship with the Duchess, to question some of the footmen and pages belonging to the ducal establishment. No one, however, recollected the particular incident of a strange carriage taking me up;—and, in fine, I could glean in that quarter nothing at all calculated to throw any light upon the subject. Fifteen months have elapsed since that period—and I am still as much in the dark as ever."

"Then your fair unknown never fulfilled her promise of contriving another interview?" exclaimed Lord Montgomery.

"Never," replied Florimel.

"Again do I pronounce the adventure to be one full of the most charming romance," said the Earl; "and I am not surprised that it should have been so vividly recalled to your memory by the unmistakable overtures conveyed to you this morning by means of the masquerade-ticket and the blue domino. Depend upon it, Florimel, your mysterious unknown has adopted this method to obtain another interview; and you cannot possibly forego the pleasure——"

"I have already besought you as a friend, Eugene," said the young nobleman, in a serious tone, "not to tempt me from that allegiance which I am so anxious to maintain towards my beloved Pauline."

"Then you are determined not to accept the invitation to that masquerade?" exclaimed Lord Montgomery. "In a word, you will not go?"

"No—ten thousand times *no*," answered Florimel. "I have done so many foolish things in my life, that I may as well endeavour for once to do a wise one; and I have broken so many solemn pledges, that I am resolved to adhere faithfully to at least one promise at last. Do not, however, think that I cheerfully resign the chance of meeting my fair unknown again—if from her this card and this domino do really come: on the contrary, it will cost me a pang—but I shall feel more satisfied with myself afterwards."

Thus speaking, Lord Florimel tore up the masquerade-ticket and tossed the pieces into the fire;—and he then rang the bell.

Rao, the sable page, instantaneously glided into the room.

"Take this domino, my boy," said Florimel, "and burn it in the kitchen fire. I have particular reasons for wishing that this should be done immediately."

As Lord Florimel gave utterance to this singular command, Lord Montgomery started with evident uneasiness, and even stretched out his hand towards the domino as if in obedience to a sudden impulse prompting him to save it from the destruction to which it had just been doomed. At the same moment the black page laid his own hand on the garment; and Montgomery caught the rapid, piercing glance which Rao threw upon him.

"Let the boy take the domino, Eugene," said Florimel; "do not attempt to change my purpose, I implore you. When the domino is once destroyed,

it will be too late for me to alter my mind, even if the weakness of my nature should prevail."

"Be it so," exclaimed Lord Montgomery, scarcely able to restrain his vexation: and once more he caught the eyes of Rao fixed upon him with a significancy which he could not however fathom.

But the next moment the boy glided away with the domino; and Montgomery rose to take his leave.

"By the bye, have you seen our buxom and agreeable friend Mrs. Brace lately?" inquired Lord Florimel.

"Not very long ago," answered Montgomery. "Indeed to tell you the candid truth, I passed the night in her society——"

"In her arms, you mean," said Florimel, laughing.

"I do not deny the soft imputation," rejoined Montgomery. "But I do not think that she will ever again be honoured with my company in the same manner."

"And why so?" demanded Florimel. "Have you grown weary of her *tête-à-tête* suppers and buxom charms?"

"Not exactly," responded Montgomery. "But a little incident happened on the last occasion—rather a disagreeable occurrence indeed—in some respects——However, I must not reveal the secrets of a gallant woman," he exclaimed, hastily interrupting himself. "So farewell, my dear friend."

"Farewell," said the young nobleman.

Lord Montgomery took his departure: but as he was passing through the hall of Florimel's mansion, he observed the sable page Rao standing in a window-recess and evidently watching him with an interest more profound and definite than that of mere curiosity. But two or three liveried lacqueys were lounging about in the place, and a footman was ceremoniously preceding Lord Montgomery towards the front door which the hall-porter had already opened;—and therefore the Earl was more

than half-inclined to disobey a sudden impulse which now prompted him to address the boy.

But still perceiving that Rao's eyes were following him with a strange significancy, he could no longer resist the secret and almost mysterious influence which urged him to address the lad. He accordingly stepped up to him, and said in a laughing manner, "Well, Rao, have you burnt the domino?"

The boy's large black eyes swept rapidly round the hall for the evident purpose of ascertaining whether any of the domestics might be within earshot: and satisfied with the result of that glance of lightning speed, he fixed his looks with a peculiar expression of deep meaning upon Earl Montgomery, saying, "Did your lordship really wish that I should destroy the blue domino?"

The nobleman started and blushed—for he felt that the boy had read the secret thoughts which animated him respecting the masquerade: but the next moment it struck him that Rao's words might only mean a piece of covert impudence, and nothing more.

"You were compelled to obey your master's orders, doubtless," the Earl accordingly said, in a vague manner: "but it was a pity all the same."

"Ah! your lordship thinks that it was a pity?" murmured Rao, darting upon him a look which seemed to penetrate into the profoundest recesses of his soul: then in a tone of unmistakable significancy, he added, "But suppose that I had disobeyed my master's commands—would your lordship think the worse of me for it?"

"There is some hidden meaning in your looks and words, boy," returned Lord Montgomery; "and we cannot converse any longer in this place. Call upon me in the evening in Grafton Street——"

"Yes — at nine o'clock punctually," observed Rao: and he glided rapidly away from the window-recess, scarcely appearing to touch the chequered marble pavement of the hall with his feet, so light was his tread and so glancingly went his steps.

The preceding dialogue occupied scarcely a minute, although we have taken several to narrate it;—and not a syllable was overheard by the other domestics present. Nor were they surprised to behold Lord Montgomery stopping to address a few words to the black page, inasmuch as the boy had already attracted the notice and won the interest of every visitor to his master's mansion.

The Earl quitted the house, and returned to his own abode in Grafton Street, where he resided with his mother the Dowager-Countess.

CHAPTER CXL.

THE BEGGAR'S STAFF AGAIN.

RETURN we once more to that sink of iniquity in Horslydown, to which we have already familiarly introduced our readers and which was known by the sign of the Beggar's Staff.

It was about seven o'clock in the evening; and the long, low, ill-lighted room was filled with company —such company as was wont to frequent the place, and which consisted of bad characters of both sexes, all ages, and every variety of description.

The observer of human nature and the moralist would indeed have found food for earnest meditation in that apartment: for *there* might have been seen utter misery hardened into inveterate vice—ineffable suffering changed into complete demoralisation—and all those phases of debauchery, profligacy, and loathsome wantonness which become apparent in the drunken orgies of society's outcasts. But had the tale of each and all of those ruffian-like men and those profligate women been ascertained with a perfect accuracy of detail, it would have assuredly transpired that not one single individual was naturally depraved from the cradle, but that all had become the miserable victims of tyrannical laws, the vitiated institutions of an artificial society, the ignorance of legislators, or the downright despotism of rich monopolists or titled plunderers!

For, oh! to talk of the freedom of Englishmen and the happiness enjoyed by "true Britons," is the most despicable farce and the most hideous mockery in the world. That freedom is a delusion—that happiness is a lie! The millions in this land are as utterly the minions of the Aristocracy as Russian serfs are held at the mercy of their masters. The white slavery of England is a truth more real, more terrible, and more tremendous than the black slavery of the Southern States of the American Union. Oh! better, better far to be a negro in a Virginian plantation, than a "free-born" peasant on an estate in England; and more preferable is the condition of the purchased African at New Orleans than that of the mechanic of Manchester! For what is the spectacle which Great Britain, with its monarchical and aristocratic institutions, presents to the view? An absolute idolatry and the most servile worship paid to Royalty and Aristocracy on the one hand; while Royalty and Aristocracy on the other reward the sycophantic sentiment by testifying the most sovereign contempt for those who thus crouch at their feet. And to extend the picture, we have *two* millions of paupers and only *one* million of voters—more pawnbrokers than butchers—more gin-shops than bakers—and almost as many prisons and workhouses as churches! O blessed land of freedom, where such is the aspect presented to the eye! But this is not all: for in our agricultural districts we behold the peasant cheerless, sickly, half-starved, and feeble in the field—and our artizans pining and wasting with want in the factory! Our rural labourers dwell in the most wretched huts imaginable—while the industrious population of our cities and towns are crowded into hovels, and attics, and cellars, and cells, with *Pestilence* for their companion!

No—Great Britain is not free; nor are her institutions good—nor her government just—nor her social system humane. The millions are in bondage —the institutions are worn out—the government is selfish and corrupt—and the social system is rotten to its very core. True, we have enormous wealth in the country: but those who produce it are starving! True, we have all the outward and visible signs of a consummate prosperity: but it is the luxuriousness which prevailed at Rome on the eve of her downfall, and amongst the Moors of Grenada when the enemy was at their gates! The mocking edifice which fools and rogues call our Temple of Liberty, is built upon the bosom of pauperism, and is surrounded by the gibbet, the chain, the hulk, the treadmill, and the spies of the Law-Officers of the Crown. Oh! what can we think of an institution which re-

quires such sentinels and scarecrows to keep off those who will not content themselves with surveying it from the distance, but are venturesome enough to approach its walls in order to ascertain by close inspection whether it be really as solid, as faultless, and as beautiful as the lying tongues of sycophants, place-men, sinecurists, and pensioners have proclaimed it to be!

One word more upon this subject! In this country we have illimitable luxury for a few and a misery as boundless for the many—we have the most gorgeous palaces overlooking the filthiest hovels which the dwellers in those mansions would not have as styes for their pigs—we have the horses and dogs of the Royal Family better cared for, better lodged, and better fed than the human sons and daughters of toil—we have royal, aristocratic, and civic processions and festivals, where diamonds glitter like a galaxy of stars, while the countenances of the gazing multitudes are haggard with want, misery, and vice—we have families in whom vast estates are entailed, thus anticipating the property of the future, and others in whom appalling destitution is as certain a heritage, thus ensuring the sorrows of the future,—in fine, we have a pampered Aristocracy rolling in riches and revelling in luxury, and we have millions of honest, hard-working, meritorious people who are clothed in rags and can scarcely get a morsel of bread to eat!

Now, then, gentle reader—tell us, and tell us truly—is Great Britain free?—are Britons happy and prosperous?

And now to resume our tale.

We said that it was about seven o'clock in the evening; and the candles were lighted in the public room at the Beggar's Staff. A blazing fire roared half-way up the wide-mouth chimney; and the heat therefrom was increased by the vapour which steamed from fifty pipes, and which impregnated the stifling atmosphere with the sickly odour of tobacco. Within the bar stood Carrotty Pall, serving the customers and rigidly enforcing the rythmical injunction painted over the door leading into the parlour. Her appearance was more untidy and slattern-like than ever: her flaming red hair was in a disorder so complete that it resembled a bundle of tow and was as deficient in arrangement as a new mop;—and her gown was all open in front, displaying the scraggy neck and chest the skin of which resembled dirty tallow.

In her avocations she was assisted by the slipshod waiter of whom mention has been before made in our narrative: and whenever she had a moment's leisure, she passed into the little parlour, where she indulged in a whispered chat with some friend who was seated there, until the wants of the next customer called her forth again into the bar-enclosure.

Matters were progressing in the usual way at the Beggar's Staff on the special evening in question: that is to say, there was no deficiency of obscene jesting, coarse conversation, smutty songs, and savage quarrelling,—no deficiency either in coin to procure the alcoholic poison which makes depravity more depraved, vice more hardened, wantonness more brazen, and crime more desperate. In some cases the men were sitting with prostitutes upon their knees: in others, they were literally reclining in the arms of the loose women whose half-naked forms glowed ruddy in the lurid light of the fire:—while a few young girls of tender age were sitting together in a group, each apparently straining every effort and racking her invention to the utmost to talk in a style more libidinous and filthy than the rest.

While the inmates of the public room at the Beggar's Staff were thus diverting themselves after their own fashion, a man muffled up in a drab great coat and wearing an ample woollen comforter round his neck, entered the pandemonium. His hat was slouched over his eyes: he carried a short but stout ash stick in his hand;—and an ugly mongrel followed at his heels.

The moment this individual made his appearance, a sudden damp seemed to fall upon the company—for to the experienced eyes of the frequenters of the Beggar's Staff there was every indication of the Bow Street runner about that man. Nor was the conjecture erroneous; for as he walked in a free and easy fashion up to the bar, he pushed his hat somewhat back from over his face, and the well known features of Mr. Mobbs were immediately recognised not only by Carrotty Poll herself, but also by the greater portion of the company present.

"I don't come officially, my dear," he hastened to observe in a loud tone to the Big Beggarman's daughter: and the announcement instantaneously allayed the suddenly excited apprehensions of many whose consciences were not so clear but that they fancied it quite possible that they might be "wanted."

"Well, Mr. Mobbs, we're always glad to see you in a *friendly* way, you know," exclaimed Carrotty Poll, rendering her vixenish voice as soothing and her manner as cordial as she possibly could. "Perhaps you'll walk round," she added, after a few moments' pause, during which she knew that the person who was in the little parlour had retired into concealment.

"Thank'ee, Miss Price," said Mobbs, accepting the invitation. "I do want to have a word or two with you in private," he observed as he walked leisurely behind the counter and entered the snuggery.

"Wait one minute, Mr. Mobbs," exclaimed the red-haired young woman; "and I will be with you. Let me see—what spirits do you like? Oh! rum—I remember—so it is!" she added, taking down a bottle from the shelf;—and then, arming herself likewise with a jug of hot water, a tumbler, and a sugar-basin, she followed the dreaded individual into the little parlour.

"Shut the door, Miss, please," said Mobbs, as he snuffed the solitary tallow candle which burnt with a dim and sickly light even in that little place. "Have you heard from your father lately, Miss?"

"Well, that's a pretty question coming from a Bow Street Officer!" exclaimed Carrotty Poll, affecting a jocose laugh, but in reality not much liking the query, inasmuch as she was instantly seized with the apprehension that her sire had been captured, and that Mobbs was come to break the tidings to her.

"'Pon my soul, I only made the remark out of politeness," said Mobbs, in a reassuring tone. "Of course I know your guv'ner is out of the way—and though I had a hand in taking him in the first instance, it was o'ny in the way of dooty and not through any disrespeck towards him. Quite t'other: for me and the Big Beggarman has had many a glass together——"

"Well, I'll tell you this much, Mr. Mobbs," interrupted Carrotty Poll, who was now satisfied that the man's visit to the Beggar's Staff did not regard her sire: "I know no more where my father is at this moment than you do—and I'm precious uneasy about him into the bargain. But what's brought you over to the Staff this evening?" she inquired, as she placed before Mobbs the reeking glass of rum-punch which she had just mixed for his special behoof.

"I've already told you it isn't official—nor more it is," responded the man, taking off his hat and comforter, and unbuttoning his drab coat: "but it's what may be called semi-official," he added, with a chuckle, as if he had given utterance to a very witty thing.

"I don't understand you, Mr. Mobbs," observed Carrotty Poll, again experiencing an uneasy sensation on account of the ambiguity of the fellow's remark.

"Well, what I mean is soon explained, Miss," rejoined Mobbs: "and the long and the short of the matter is that I'm no more a constable at this moment than you are, but that I've come here to see if I can obtain any clue to the unravelling of a partickler business so that I may get restored to my situation."

"Then you're suspended, Mr. Mobbs?" said Poll, inquiringly.

"Just so," was the answer: "and consekvently my visit is only half-official, as the saying is."

"Well, but what is the business about?" demanded the red-haired young woman, somewhat snappishly—for her courage came back, and with it a portion of her natural ill-temper, when she learnt that Mobbs was no longer dangerous nor terrible.

"The fact is," said this individual, "you've no doubt heard how a certain Caroline Walters gave me and Grumley the slip a week ago——"

"Yes—she jumped out of the window and drowned herself," interrupted Carrotty Poll. "At least, so we heard it reported in Horsleydown."

"Well, the rumour was tolerably correct," continued Mobbs: "but ever since the very night of that occurrence Grumley has been missing in a most unaccountable manner—and so the magistrates naturally suspect that he's bolted on account of that affair."

"P'raps they don't believe the story of the young woman's leap from the window in order to commit suicide?" observed Carrotty Poll.

"You've just hit it, Miss," exclaimed Mobbs. "The disappearance of Grumley has thrown suspicion on the whole affair—and the authorities will have it that me and him was bribed to let the prisoner Caroline Walters escape. So I am suspended until such time as the matter can be cleared up satisfactorily."

"But how do you hope to gain any clue at the Staff to your friend Grumley's proceedings?" demanded Carrotty Poll, with an acerbity which she scarcely took the trouble to conceal. "Remember, Mr. Mobbs, that *I* for one have no reason to be grateful either to you or Mr. Grumley for nabbing my father——"

"Quite in the way of business, my dear," interrupted Mobbs: "and remember that although I am suspended *now*, I may *soon* be restored to my post—and I shall not fail to mark them as treats me with incivility while I'm under the cloud."

"I'm sure I wouldn't treat you with incivility for the world, Mr. Mobbs," exclaimed Carrotty Poll, understanding the significancy and feeling the force of the implied menace. "But pray do tell me what information you hoped to obtain at the Staff?" she inquired, with renewed mildness of tone and manner.

"Why, to speak plain, Miss," said Mobbs, after a few moments' deep rumination, "I've been weighing in my mind this business of Grumley's sudden disappearance—and the longer I think of it, the more I'm convinced that he's made himself scarce for certain reasons——"

"Ah! I begin to understand," exclaimed Carrotty Poll, whose shrewdness enabled her to detect the rancour which was lurking at the bottom of the man's mind in respect to his late superior in office. "Mr. Grumley hasn't behaved well towards you in respect to your share of the proceeds of some transaction—pr'aps this very affair of Caroline Walters's *suicide*," she added, with a significant leer.

"Well, well," said Mobbs, laughing: "it's likely enough you ain't far wide of the mark, Miss."

"And so Grumley has really cheated you out of your regulars?" observed Carrotty Poll, in a musing tone. "I shouldn't have thought him capable of it."

"Neither did I," rejoined Mobbs. "But there's no saying what may happen in this world, or what a man may do. Howsomever, it's of no use to waste walyable time in idle obserwations; and so I'll just tell you at once what I want with you and why I come to the Staff to-night. That Grumley has made himself scarce, I'm pretty sure—and that he's got a large sum of money in his possession, there's no doubt. Now such a man won't leave London: I know his habits too well for that. He'll keep quiet till the affair about Caroline Walters has blowed over; and then he'll either manage to make his peace with the authorities, or else set up in business as a thief-catcher on his own account. But he shan't bilk me in no such a fashion; and therefore I'm resolved to ferret him out. If so be, then, you'll help me, I'll make it well worth your while: for I'll give you fifty guineas for any such information as may enable me to unkennel the old fox—and what's more, I'll take care that in future you shall always have a private hint conveyed to you when anything disagreeable turns up respecting the frequenters of the Staff. Now then, do you understand me?—and can we strike a bargain?"

"I think we may," replied Carrotty Poll. "And if any one in London can obtain a trace of Grumley's retreat, that person is myself—for there isn't a soul frequenting the Staff that won't be upon the look-out when I give the word."

"That's exactly what I thought," said Mobbs: "and as Grumley is very naturally detested by all your folks, they'll be glad to do him an ill turn."

"No doubt," observed Carrotty Poll. "But suppose he should return to Bow Street and make his peace with the authorities—won't he remember me for any evil office that I may have done him?"

"How should he know anythink about it?" demanded Mobbs. "Come, Miss Price—there's no need of being timid in the matter—as I mean fair-play on my part."

"But how am I to know, Mr. Mobbs," said Carrotty Poll, "that all this isn't some sly plant on your part—for some purpose or another——"

"Lord bless ye, my dear!" exclaimed the ill-looking fellow, endeavouring to appear as aniable as possible: "what object can I have to serve in all this, except the one I've explained to you? But to

convince you that I'm in earnest, and indeed to place myself somewhat in your power, I'll tell you openly and candidly at once that the whole business about Caroline Walters' leap from the winder *was* a put-up affair on the part of Grumley and me; and a certain fashionable milliner at the West End, whose name shall be nameless, was the person which instigated us to get the young gal off in some fashion or another. Well, we was to have five hundred guineas for the job: and as soon as it was done—indeed, on the very night that the leap from the winder took place—Grumley called on the milliner aforesaid to receive the blunt. I went with him as far as the door of her house; and he said enough to let me know that he was raather in love with her: for she's a very handsome woman. Well, there we parted; and from that moment I've never clapt eyes on him again. Next morning I called on the lady—that is to say, the milliner—and she assured me he didn't remain with her above ten minutes or a quarter of an hour at the outside. She likewise told me that she had paid him the five hundred guineas; and she gave me fifty for myself. I then took my departure: and now, Miss Price, you see how matters stand and you will believe that I am in earnest in everythink I am saying or doing."

"Yes—I believe you now, Mr. Mobbs," answered Carrotty Poll: "but you will excuse me if I was rather suspicious at first?"

"Don't mention it, my dear," said Mobbs. "We have now come to an understanding together——"

At this moment the low door at the end of the little room was opened suddenly; and the Gallows' Widow made her appearance.

"I've overheard every syllable that has passed between you," she hastily exclaimed; "and I think I can add some important information to what *you* already know concerning your friend Grumley," she added, fixing her eyes upon Mobbs.

"Indeed!" ejaculated Carrotty Poll. "Then you'll share the fifty guineas with me, Lizzy, if you earn them?"

"Yes—yes," said the Gallows' Widow: "I always act fair towards my pals."

"But what do you know about Grumley, Mrs. Marks?" inquired Mobbs, unable to restrain his impatience."

"I will tell you all in good time," returned the Gallows' Widow, now speaking without excitement and deliberately taking a chair at the table. "During the whole of your conversation, Mr. Mobbs, with Poll Price, I've been on the other side of that door; and therefore I have not lost a word of it. The fashionable milliner to whom you alluded, is Mrs. Brace of Pall Mall."

"Ah! you're indeed upon the scent—that's plain enough!" cried Mobbs. "Go on."

"On the same night when Grumley called upon Mrs. Brace, I paid her a visit also," proceeded the Gallows' Widow; "and I saw her and Grumley together."

"Is that possible, Lizzy?" exclaimed Carrotty Poll. "Why—you did not tell me anything about it?"

"I have only seen you twice since then," said the Gallows' Widow: "last Wednesday and to-night—and on neither occasion had we much time to chatter upon indifferent things."

"But didn't Grumley arrest you?" demanded Mobbs.

"To be sure he did," answered Elizabeth Marks: "and Mrs. Brace made a compromise with him to get me off. In a word, Grumley imposed his own conditions—and she consented."

"What was the conditions?" inquired Mobbs.

"Fifty guineas in cash and a share of Mrs. Brace's bed for the night," was the startling response.

"By jingo!" ejaculated Mobbs, a sudden reminiscence striking him: "I now recollect that when I called upon the milliner, she seemed very much excited and confused—and I fancied she had been drinking."

"But did you observe of what nature was the confusion she exhibited?" inquired the Gallows' Widow, her manner suddenly becoming profoundly mysterious. "Because there is an embarrassment arising from shame, and another from guilt: a man of your profession, Mr. Mobbs, ought to know the difference."

"Well, now—you've excited strange ideas in my head," observed Mobbs, in a reflective tone; "and I do remember that Mrs. Brace's manner was uncommonly suspicious. And the more I think of it, the more it reminds me of the way in which a woman looked and spoke when I went to take her up on suspicion of murdering her husband some years ago."

"Ah! then Mrs. Brace looked and spoke like a murderess—did she?" said the Gallows' Widow, her usually tranquil voice now expressing a fiendish malignity.

"You know more than you choose to admit, Mrs. Marks," exclaimed Mobbs. "But, by jingo! if such a thing has really taken place——"

"What thing?" demanded the Gallows' Widow.

"Why—that Grumley has been murdered," replied Mobbs: "and now I have put into the shape of language the suspicion which you have excited in my mind."

"And you have fully caught the meaning which I intended to convey," said the Gallows' Widow. "For how stands the matter? The last trace which we at present possess of Peter Grumley, leaves him at midnight in Mrs. Brace's house. He has never been seen or heard of afterwards. It is quite clear that he did not intend to make himself scarce at that time: because if he had entertained such a notion, he would not have arrested me. But that he had been making love to Mrs. Brace before I called, was clear enough from what he said when he imposed upon her the conditions of that compromise in virtue of which I was suffered to depart scot free: and from all I observed, it was equally clear that she viewed with horror and loathing the prospect of submitting to the embraces of such a many. You must also reflect that she had that same night paid this very man five hundred and fifty guineas: and now what aspect does the whole affair assume?"

"Why, that the milliner had every inducement possible to make away with Grumley," answered Mobbs,—"not only to get back her money, but likewise to rid herself of the necessity of admitting him to her bed."

"Such is my idea!" exclaimed the Gallows' Widow, with the excitement of a malignant triumph: then between her teeth she muttered, "Now, Mrs. Brace, I will be avenged upon you for the contempt and scorn with which you treated me the other night!"

And in the little parlour behind the bar of the Beggar's Staff did Mobbs remain until a late hour in consultation with the Gallows' Widow and Carrotty Poll.

CHAPTER CXLI.

RAO AT EARL MONTGOMERY'S MANSION.

It was nine o'clock in the evening as Rao, Lord Florimel's black page, rang the servants' bell of a handsome house in Grafton Street. A liveried lacquey soon responded to the summons; and the sable youth was forthwith conducted into the presence of Lord Montgomery.

This nobleman was seated in a handsomely-furnished parlour with a bay-window; and an open door afforded a view of a smaller room adjoining. Both apartments contained some very fine paintings set in magnificent frames. The subjects were chiefly landscapes; and amongst them there was one representing a charming piece of true English scenery—a picturesque village with its ivy-covered church-tower.

Lord Montgomery was reading a book while he sipped his claret, when the black menial was shown into his presence. Laying aside the volume, and stretching out his legs before the fire with an air of indifference, his lordship said, "Well, my boy—you have something to tell me, have you not?"

"Oh! if the object of my presence here be so very trivial and unimportant," exclaimed Rao, in a tone expressive of a dignity cruelly mortified, "I may as well depart at once. Good evening, my lord:"—and the page glided towards the door.

"Stop, you wayward boy!" cried Montgomery. "By heaven! you are prompt to take offence——"

"Yes—even as I am ready to render a service," rejoined the lad, with a marked significancy: and turning round, he again approached the nobleman.

"Singular being!" ejaculated the latter: "are you more or less than you seem? Surely you were not bred and born to be the lacquey of an Englishman? There is a grace in your movements—an elegance in your attitudes—a perfect accuracy in your speech—a gentility in your manners——"

"Enough of flattery, my lord!" exclaimed Rao, sharply. "Who and what I am, matters not to you: and if you suspect that I am not what I appear, you will keep your own counsel in that respect, because I am prepared to render you a service of a nature which will lay you under no small obligation towards me!"

"Sit down, Rao—sit down," said Lord Montgomery, well convinced that the boy was indeed something more than he appeared and that the lacquey's livery suited not well his real condition, however elegantly it might become his slight and graceful figure. "Now will you take a glass of wine?"

"I thank your lordship," responded the page; "but my favourite beverage is water. And now you will permit me at once to open the discourse upon the topic which it is destined to take, inasmuch as I dare not remain too long absent from Piccadilly."

"Proceed," said Lord Montgomery, the first feeling of prejudice and dislike which he had entertained towards the page, having already changed into one of sympathy and interest.

"Your lordship intends to be present at the masquerade which is to take place at Covent Garden to-morrow night?" said Rao, fixing his dark eyes with a peculiar keenness upon the nobleman's countenance.

"Yes—such is my intention," was the reply.

"And your lordship would fain personate my master, Lord Florimel?" continued Rao, in the same precise tone and positive manner which seemed to show that he was describing those thoughts which he had fathomed, and was not hazarding interrogative conjectures.

"Well—I am not audacious enough to deny the truth of your surmise," said Lord Montgomery.

"Surmise!" echoed the boy, in a contemptuous tone. "Think you, my lord, that I cannot read your hidden soul as plainly as the printed page of a book? Yes—I have penetrated all your thoughts and wishes in respect to that masquerade—aye, and I have read all the hopes which the narrative of Lord Florimel's romantic adventure has excited within you."

"Then you played the eaves-dropper, Rao, when your master was telling me that strange story?" exclaimed Earl Montgomery.

"Yes—I have read all your secret wishes and all your fervent hopes, my lord," resumed the boy, without heeding the remark which the nobleman had just made and which proclaimed an accusation that he would doubtless have denied if he could.

At this instant the door was opened, and a servant entered the room. Rao started to his feet, evidently to save Lord Montgomery from any suspicion or misconstruction that might arise from the fact of his being found familiarly seated with a liveried page: and the nobleman threw at the boy a rapid glance expressive of his thanks for this proof of good taste on his part.

"Please your lordship," said the domestic who had just entered the room, "Mr. Rigden requests an immediate interview. He has only one word to say, and will not detain your lordship a minute."

"Show him in," returned Montgomery: then observing the page, whose presence he had at the instant forgotten, he said, "Step into the adjacent room, my boy, while I say a few words to my solicitor. It is not worth the trouble to make you step out into the hall for the short period that we shall be engaged together."

This proceeding on the Earl's part was another phase of that tacit respect with which he was inspired towards Rao by the belief that he was something more than he seemed—an idea that forbade the nobleman from treating the boy as a mere lacquey. And Rao understood the considerate feeling which was thus manifested towards him: for even as he glided into the adjoining room, he looked back to express his grateful appreciation thereof with a rapid, fervent glance.

The sable page closed the door behind him; and at the same moment Mr. Rigden was ushered into the presence of Lord Montgomery.

The attorney was a middle-aged man, with a pale face and keen gray eyes. He was dressed in black, wore a white cravat and ample shirt frill, and was altogether very precise in his personal appearance. He took snuff: but he managed the habit in so cleanly a manner that his linen never betrayed it even by a single grain of the pulverised weed. His bearing was naturally cold, reserved, and distant: he never spoke hastily, and scarcely ever betrayed

an emotion—much less a feeling of excitement;—in fine, he was one of those shrewd, cautious, and even mistrustful men who never take a step without looking well where they are about to tread, and never give utterance to a word without having deliberately weighed it in all its probable or possible bearings.

"Well, Rigden," said Lord Montgomery, rising to proffer his hand to the lawyer, while the domestic who had introduced him retired immediately from the apartment: "what news? Has anything unpleasant happened?"

"Nothing unpleasant," answered the attorney, abandoning the tips of two fingers to the nobleman's grasp—for he himself hated shaking hands and all similar proofs of friendship or social amenity. "Just as I was leaving my office this evening I received a certain notice from the Court; and I thought that as I was compelled to visit your neighbourhood at about nine, I would call and communicate the circumstances to your lordship."

"And what is the notice about?" demanded Montgomery, literally trembling with feverish impatience.

"The notice, my lord," said Mr. Rigden, taking out his gold snuff-box and deliberately indulging in a pinch of its contents, "is from the Court of Chancery, and is to the effect that the Master's final report will be delivered in on Saturday next in the several matters of 'Montgomery *versus* Bellenden,' 'Raymond Montgomery *versus* Bellenden,' and 'Aylmer *versus* Bellenden.'"

"On Saturday next?" repeated the nobleman, with the air of one who trembled at the close proximity of an event to which he had nevertheless been looking forward with so much anxiety.

"Yes—on Saturday next," said Mr. Rigden.

"Then all the fresh evidence has been put in?" continued Montgomery in a tone of anxious inquiry: "all the important and very remarkable testimony which I have procured from the country within the last few weeks?"

"It is all before the Master, my lord," replied Mr. Rigden.

"Come, now—do throw off this hyperborean chill—this more than professional reserve," exclaimed Lord Montgomery, "and tell me candidly and as a friend whether you feel convinced that the decrees will be in our favour."

"Nothing, my lord, is certain in this world," responded the attorney, taking another pinch of snuff, and leaning forward in such a manner that not a grain should alight upon his snowy shirt-frill: "and of all uncertain things the results of Chancery suits are the most incalculable," he added.

"But the evidence I procured the other day," insisted Lord Montgomery, "must prove overwhelming?"

"It will have its weight, my lord," said the attorney. "By the bye, your brother Lord Raymond Montgomery should be in London in the course of the week, as his presence is indispensible. You remember how singular is that clause of your ancestor's will under which he claims the Warwickshire estates——"

"Indeed, I can scarcely have forgotten a single syllable of a testamentary provision so vitally important to our family interests," observed Lord Montgomery. "But I will write to my brother to-morrow," he added hastily: "and I will urge him to come up to town without delay. I have not heard from him, nor indeed of him, for some weeks past——"

"His melancholy disposition leads him to seek the retirement of a rural existence," observed the attorney. "But does his lordship still feel as much as ever that disappointment which his heart's affections experienced? And, by the bye—when I think of it—the marriage of Miss Aylmer to Mr. Clarendon, now Lord Holderness, must have been a sad blow to your unhappy brother, inasmuch as it destroyed the last hope which he could possibly have cherished——"

"Yes—he no doubt loved Fernanda very dearly," observed Lord Montgomery, with a certain hastiness, amounting almost to a pettishness of manner—as if he either disliked the subject, or thought it irrelevant at that moment. "I suppose that now the Master's report is ready, judgment will be delivered very shortly?"

"We have every reason to hope so, my lord," returned Mr. Rigden. "But in case your lordship should forget to write to Lord Raymond to-morrow, I will myself communicate with him. I presume a letter will reach him at Malden Farm?"

"He was there when I heard of him last," responded Earl Montgomery. "You had better write to him yourself: it will be more regular."

"I shall assuredly do so," said the attorney, taking another pinch of snuff. "And now, before I leave your lordship," he continued, a thought striking him, "I should wish to ask a certain question respecting a noble acquaintance of yours—and yet I scarcely know how to take such a liberty——"

"Do not hesitate, Mr. Rigden," exclaimed Lord Montgomery. "If I can serve you in any manner, I shall be delighted. To whom of my noble acquaintances do you allude?"

"To Lord Florimel," answered the attorney. "But lest the question which I am desirous to ask your lordship should appear impertinent, I will explain in a few words my motives in putting it. The fact is that this very morning a noble client of mine introduced to me a young man who has suddenly and strangely discovered certain grounds and reasons for supposing that he has claims of an extraordinary nature which would materially affect the fortune and the social position of Lord Florimel; and I must frankly confess that as far as I was enabled to look into the matter at the moment it was presented to me, the young man's claims appear to be well worth a law-suit. At the same time, I have no doubt that he would listen to any reasonable terms for an amicable settlement without the intervention of the tribunals; and to this course I should recommend him to accede. The question, therefore, that I was desirous to ask your lordship, is whether Lord Florimel is a man likely to treat the affair in a friendly way if it be submitted to him in the same spirit—or whether he is one of those obstinate individuals who, believing that possession is worth nine points of the law, will plunge headlong into Chancery with a neck or nothing determination."

"I should say that Lord Florimel will listen to reason," answered Montgomery. "But I am sorry to hear that he is menaced in so serious a manner—and I am pretty sure that he suspects nothing of the

kind: for I was with him this morning for a couple of hours, and we were conversing in a most familiar strain upon many topics of a private nature."

"No—he at present entertains not the slightest idea of the storm which is brewing," observed Rigden: "and I must beg your lordship, as a particular favour, not to mention a word upon the subject until he shall first broach it to you. For it was in a pure friendly spirit that I put such a question to you just now; and I repeat, that my advice will be to the effect of a private compromise instead of an appeal to the Law Courts."

"Would it be indiscreet to ask who is the claimant and what is the nature of his claims against Lord Florimel?" said Montgomery. "I pledge you my honour that not a syllable of anything you may communicate shall pass my lips——"

"My lord, I cannot mention the name of the claimant," said the lawyer, "because the matter is as yet entirely in its infancy. But this much I have no objection to state, that the claims advanced are of the most sweeping and extensive nature—not only striking at the possessions of Lord Florimel, but even at his very right to the peerage itself."

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Montgomery: "you astonish me! And yet it was but this very morning that Lord Florimel happened to mention to me in the course of conversation that he was in possession of all the deeds and documents regarding his estates."

"Ah! he told your lordship *that*—did he?" said Mr. Rigden, taking a pinch of snuff. "Then all I can now add is that the piece of information you have just given me has quite set at rest one portion of the matter of which I have been speaking: for the claims of the young man to the Florimel estates are founded upon a belief that no regular deeds conferring a title upon the present holder are in existence."

"Then I am glad you have mentioned the affair to me, my dear Rigden," exclaimed Montgomery: "for I can assure you that Florimel not only possesses his deeds and parchments, but has even told me where he keeps them."

"In that case, as I said before, one part of the business is set at rest," observed the lawyer. "The only claim now remaining regards the peerage—and that point cannot be worth disputing, inasmuch as a mere empty title would be a burthen instead of an honour to a penniless man. So, after all, I think that Lord Florimel is quite safe—and I return your lordship many thanks for the information you have given me. Good evening, my lord."

"Will you not step up stairs to the drawing-room and inform my mother of the notice you have received from the Chancery Court?" inquired Montgomery. "The Countess is all alone this evening——"

"I will do myself the honour of waiting upon her," said Rigden;—and, with a ceremonious bow, he quitted the apartment.

At the same moment that the door closed behind him, the remembrance that the black page was in the adjoining room flashed to the brain of Lord Montgomery, who had altogether forgotten the circumstance during the interview with the lawyer.

"Perdition!" muttered the nobleman to himself, as he recollected the eaves-dropping propensities of the sable page: but he was almost instantaneously reassured by the thought that nothing had passed with the lawyer touching his own family affairs that he could care about the boy overhearing, while all that had been said respecting Lord Florimel was of very inferior importance.

Throwing open the door of communication between the two apartments, the nobleman was about to call Rao by name, when he caught sight of the boy reclining in a large arm-chair and apparently wrapped in the profoundest repose. Montgomery advanced into the inner room, where a light was also burning as well as in the other; and the door, escaping from his hand, closed with some degree of violence. Rao started up—rubbed his eyes—and in a few moments seemed to recollect where he was.

"I humbly beg your lordship's pardon," he said, "for having so far forgotten myself as to fall asleep. But is it late?" he demanded with a sudden anxiety.

"A quarter to ten," answered Montgomery, referring to his watch. "That cursed lawyer came for a minute and stayed half-an-hour."

"And I will not detain your lordship one-tenth of that time," said Rao. "To sum up, therefore, all I have said or was about to say, I will at once observe that as your lordship intends to go to the masquerade to-morrow night, you will do well to accept the loan of a domino which I will leave with your lordship's valet in the course of the day."

"Ah! I understand you full well, Rao," exclaimed the Earl: "your master's commands have been disobeyed—and you have not destroyed the blue domino."

The black page smiled with an arch significancy—but made no reply.

"And yet," observed Montgomery, "I cannot conceive wherefore you should have shown so much anxiety not only to fathom my desires, but also to gratify them?"

"Simply because I am fond of amusing myself in a particular manner," said Rao: "and the sort of amusement which I like is what you English people call *mischief*."

"Yes—I have heard that East Indians are apt to be as mischievous as monkeys," observed the nobleman, laughing: "and now I have received a proof of it. Well, my good boy, I accept your offer—and I will wear the domino. But of course this is a secret between you and me."

"I am not likely to reveal it," said Rao, laconically.

"And I pledge you my word that I will not," returned the nobleman: then, after a few moments' hesitation, he said, "But tell me how I can reward you for this service which you are rendering me—for I scarcely know by what means to testify my sense of your kindness."

"I require nothing at present, my lord," answered Rao. "Should I ever need a boon at your hands, I shall come and ask it."

"And most cheerfully shall I grant your request, if it be in my power to do so," said the Earl.

The black page bowed a slight but graceful acknowledgment of the pledge thus given, and then took his departure—gliding away from the nobleman's presence like a shadow

"There is something incomprehensibly mysterious about that boy!" said Lord Montgomery to himself, as he returned to his seat in the front room.

CHAPTER CXLII.

THE MASQUERADE.—SCENE THE FIRST.

FAITHFUL to his promise, the black page delivered the braided domino at Lord Montgomery's house in Grafton Street, on the morning following the incidents just related; and at about ten o'clock in the evening, the nobleman alighted from a plain carriage at the entrance to Covent Garden Theatre.

He was enveloped in the domino, the hood of which was drawn almost entirely over his head: and in addition to this precaution, he wore a mask. It was thus impossible to obtain the slightest glimpse of his countenance, while through the holes of the mask his eyes commanded a perfect view of the brilliant scene into the midst of which he now entered.

The only circumstance which made him fear that the trick would prove a failure and that he could not succeed in passing himself off as Lord Florimel, was the difference in their stature: for although Montgomery was only of the middle height, yet Florimel was shorter still—and there was a probability that the keen observation of a woman would notice this fact. However, Montgomery regarded the adventure as one well worth the trial; and he had already made up his mind to play his part with the utmost caution, tact, and circumspection, in case he should really be accosted by some disguised beauty.

The interior of Covent Garden Theatre presented a scene of the most dazzling brilliancy. The pit was completely boarded over, so that a floor was formed to meet the stage; and at the end of the stage itself a full band was placed, under the direction of a celebrated leader. The arena was crowded with masques, displaying every variety of costume, every singularity of fancy-dress, and every artifice to ensure complete

disguise;—and the boxes were thronged with occupants, some in masquerade attire, and others in ball-dresses. The magnificent crystal chandeliers suspended to the ceiling and the candelabra projecting from around the tiers of boxes, flooded the vast interior of the building with an also overpowering lustre—so that everything was penetrated as it were with light, and the countless beings gathered there moved about like butterflies and gorgeous insects in the noon-day sun.

The music was playing—and the body of harmony, with its variations of sweetness and grandeur, pathos and excitement, seemed to fill every part of the theatre. The atmosphere was warm and perfumed—the murmuring of soft voices formed an undercurrent of sound dominated by the superior swell of the superb music—and the eye of the beholder wandered with ineffable delight over the fairy scene.

Lord Montgomery walked slowly round the arena, keeping close to the lowest tier of boxes in order that he might command a view of all the disguised forms, male or female, that were moving about upon that elastic floor: then he mingled in the crowd itself, exchanging jests with some and provoking witty repartees from others—but still without attracting the special notice of any particular lady.

At length, retiring from the thickest of the crowd and posting himself near the musicians, he began to scrutinise in detail all the female masques who seemed to be invested with any degree of interest.

But scarcely had he stationed himself in that spot which appeared so convenient for his survey, when an elegant female, dressed as a flower-girl, passed rapidly by him; and from behind the black satin mask which covered her countenance, she darted upon him a look that seemed intended to pierce through his disguise, impenetrable though it really were.

Montgomery followed her with his eyes as she plunged into the midst of the crowd;—and he saw enough of her to excite the liveliest interest in his soul. She was tall in stature; and her exquisitely-modelled form appeared to be almost visible through the picturesque attire which she wore—so admirably was it fitted to her shape and so well did it develop the fluent and rounded proportions of those very contours which it concealed. The short petticoats displayed the sculptured delicacy of the feet and ankles and the robust swell of the legs; and on one of the white and beauteously moulded arms, which were bare, hung a basket of artificial flowers. Her hair was of a rich dark brown; and as much of the neck, throat, and bosom as met the eye of the beholder, was of a dazzling whiteness. Nothing, in fine, could exceed the purity of that polished skin—nothing could be more charming than that snowy complexion which belonged to flesh evidently plump and warm with the vigorous health of youth.

Montgomery was so struck by her appearance and so ravished by the graces of her person, that he would have staked his soul upon the belief that her countenance was of a corresponding beauty. So lost in rapture was he that he seemed transfixed to the spot; and when he thought of following her, it was too late—she had disappeared amidst the thickest of the multitude of masques. But it instantaneously struck him that this must be the lady who had sent the domino and who expected to meet Lord Florimel beneath that disguise;—and then, recollecting how keen was the glance which she threw upon him and how precipitate was the immediate retreat, he said to himself, "The adventure is a failure! She saw that mine was not the stature of Lord Florimel—and she has departed in mingled rage and disappointment!"

But scarcely had he made this reflection, when he was startled with a thrill of ecstatic feeling that passed like an electric shock through his entire frame, on beholding the graceful Flower Girl once more issue from the crowd and approach the spot where he was standing. Her pace was now slow and her step somewhat hesitating; and even from behind that mask which formed so impervious a veil to conceal any confusion which she might have experienced, did she evidently send forth agitated glances. But the soft and graceful balancing of her gait—the floating elegance of her form—and the seductive charm of all her movements, rivetted the attention of Lord Montgomery and he thought within himself that if this lady should indeed prove the heroine of the present adventure, no effort that he could possibly make to possess her ought to be spared. For to his memory rushed all the glowing descriptions which Florimel had given him of that night of mystery, love, and voluptuousness,—those four hours of frenzied bliss, thrilling ecstacies, and burning kisses; and Montgomery said to himself, "My God! if this be the woman whose amorous proficiency plunged Florimel into a never-to-be-forgotten paradise, I would sooner lose my own soul to Satan than the chance of enjoying the mingled intoxication and delirium of her warm embraces and furious caresses."

And while these reflections swept through the brain of Earl Montgomery, the Flower Girl—for so must we denominate the charming unknown—was still advancing towards him;—while he remained motionless as a statue, but devouring her with the ardent looks which he threw upon her from behind his mask. For as yet he could not be sure that she was purposely accosting him—nor was it an unmistakable certainty that he was indeed an object of attention or interest on her part. She might be moving in that direction in the abstraction of her thoughts—or she might believe him to be some one for whom she was looking, and yet not have in view the aims which he hoped and suspected.

While he was making these additional reflections, she approached within three yards of the spot where he was standing: then she passed him by at a pace so slow as to convince him that she was only seeking the leisure and the opportunity to contemplate him with attention—for her eyes, shining like twin-diamonds through the mask, remained fixed upon him the whole time.

"Yes — she *is* the lady of this adventure," thought Montgomery within himself. "She recognises the domino—but she hesitates because I am taller than Florimel. Would that I were of a stature as feminine as his!"

The Flower Girl passed by the nobleman and advanced as far as the music-stands at the extremity of the stage: then turning abruptly round, she again approached him, slackening her pace as she drew nearer towards the spot where he still stood motionless. It struck him that he would speak to her: but he was afraid that he could not sufficiently imitate Florimel's voice in order to deceive her—and he saw the monstrous imprudence

of doing anything to strengthen the suspicion with which she already appeared to view him.

Again she passed him by—closer this time than before;—and he could even catch the bright and searching looks which she fixed upon him. Yes—and he heard, too, the subdued sigh which came from her bosom, and which seemed to torture her with a suffocating effect.

The impulse which now seized upon him was irresistible: and stepping forward, he took her hand, saying in a low whisper, "Beauteous lady, wherefore are you unhappy?"

For an instant he felt her hand tremble even through the white kid glove which covered it: the next moment that hand was snatched back with a strange abruptness—and her looks appeared to flash through her mask, as she said in a tone that was musically fluid though evidently feigned, "Who are you?"

"I am *Lord Florimel* to the world—*Gabriel* to you, sweet lady, whoever you may be," was the response delivered by Montgomery, in a key so soft and low that it was impossible it could either confirm or lull a suspicion as to whose voice it really was.

"You are Lord Florimel?" said the Flower-Girl, her own voice now sounding so tremulously as to be scarcely audible—and the Earl could perceive that her entire frame writhed as if with a sudden convulsion, but whether of frenzied joy or searching anguish he could not at the instant conjecture: for that abrupt vibration so much resembled the spasm of a bitter affliction—and yet what other feeling could influence her save a thrill of ecstacy?

"Yes—I am Lord Florimel," repeated Montgomery, still rendering his voice utterly impossible to be recognised; "and you, dearest lady——"

"Traitor!—perjurer!" murmured the unknown, in a dying voice—and she appeared suddenly to stagger as if about to fall.

Montgomery, though struck with dismay at the tremendous epithets which had just been hurled at his head, stretched out his arms to save her: but this movement on his part seemed to recall her to herself in an instant—and repelling his attentions with an evident mingling of hatred and scorn, she darted away—glided with the aerial lightness of a Bayadere amidst the crowd—and was lost to his view.

"Damnation!" murmured Lord Montgomery to himself: "the adventure is spoilt—the trick is discovered—the game is lost! She perceived that I was *not* Lord Florimel: and as it was Lord Florimel—and Lord Florimel only—whom she was resolved to have, no substitute would answer her purpose. But what on earth did she mean by calling me a *perjurer?* The word '*traitor*,' is intelligible enough—for it is doubtless a treacherous act to personate one's friend in a love-intrigue of so delicate a nature as this. But perjurer—perjurer—how can I be a perjurer? Perhaps she meant that I was the traitor and Florimel the perjurer: and yet he assured me that she never bound him by any oath or pledge at all. Be that, however, as it will—it is not the less annoying to experience so signal a failure in an enterprise which promised to be of so delicious a piquancy. She must assuredly be a splendid creature! What a glorious complexion—what admirably-moulded arms—what a superb length of limb—and what an elegant figure! Then the bust—just ample enough to be voluptuous—and yet appearing to possess a virginal plumpness and firmness! Albeit she is no virgin, if Florimel's tale be true: and who can doubt it? Still there is about this charming being a certain maiden freshness and all that wholesome flush of youthfulness which do not bespeak a long nor an intimate acquaintance with amorous pursuits and exciting pleasures. Oh! it is enough to drive me mad with rage and disappointment, to think that I should have lost so golden an opportunity! But I may yet make my peace with her—it is not perhaps too late—and who knows what may be the result? I will plead the strength of a passion excited almost to delirium by the tale which Lord Florimel narrated;—and I will reveal the whole truth—who I am—and by what stratagem I hoped to take the place of the young noble whose puritanical devotion to his Pauline would not permit him to plunge into this intrigue! Yes—let me seek the mysterious Flower Girl—and all will yet be well!"

With this last reflection still traversing his brain, Lord Montgomery hastened in search of the disguised lady who had already excited so deep an interest in his heart.

CHAPTER CXLIII.

THE MASQUERADE.—SCENE THE SECOND.

We must now inform the reader of a circumstance which we did not choose to interrupt our narrative to relate before. This was, that while the Flower Girl was timidly hovering about the spot where Lord Montgomery had been posted, in the manner already related, her movements were observed and keenly though cautiously watched by two individuals in masquerade costume.

One was a tall and somewhat portly man, of fine proportions and robust symmetry. He was attired in a Turkish garb remarkable for the richness of its material and the elegance of its ornaments; and his countenance was carefully concealed by a black satin mask.

His companion, who was of shorter stature, was dressed in a black domino, and likewise wore a mask.

These two persons had entered the theatre almost at the same time as the Flower Girl; and as the Turk was immediately struck by the winning grace and seductive elegance of her appearance, concealed though her features were, he had followed her amidst the mazes of the crowd—though at such a distance as to avoid exciting her suspicions. His companion in the black domino kept constantly a few paces in the rear; and whenever the Turk addressed a word to him, he received the communication with the profound deference of an inferior.

From the first moment, we say, that they had caught sight of the Flower Girl, they had watched her motions, in order to ascertain whether she was altogether alone, or whether she had an appointment with some one for whom she was searching. They had seen her approach Lord Montgomery in the first instance—they had observed the scrutinizing look which she threw upon him—and they had marked the rapidity with which she turned back and plunged again into the crowd. Then they followed her at a distance; and they perceived

that she was evidently hastening away from the brilliant scene, probably with a view of quitting it altogether; and the Turk was already pressing forward to introduce himself to her notice, when she suddenly stopped short as if some new idea had struck her—and the next moment she was retracing her way through the busy throng of masques, towards the spot where the Blue Domino (Lord Montgomery) was still standing.

The Turk and the Black Domino likewise altered their course, still bending their steps in the track of that being whose form possessed so many captivating graces as to impress upon the mind the conviction that her face must be of a corresponding loveliness.

But this time she approached the Blue Domino with a slower and more timid step—and while she was thus accosting Montgomery in the manner and with the result already described, the Turk and the Black Domino were intently observing her proceedings from the opposite side of the stage.

"By the living God, Germain," said the Turk, suddenly clutching his companion by the arm, "I never was so enchanted by the elegance, the symmetry, and the grace of a woman's form, as I am at this moment! Such a creature must possess the countenance of a divinity."

"Her complexion is certainly charming, your Royal Highness," was the response given by the Black Domino.

"Her complexion!" ejaculated the Prince of Wales, who was disguised in the Turkish garb: "is that all you notice with regard to her? Look at her figure—it is as finely proportioned as that of poor Octavia Clarendon. Then her foot and ankle—and the symmetry of her leg——Oh! Germain, I must and will possess her—and 'tis for you to manage the affair for me in some way or another."

"Your Royal Highness may rest assured that if it be possible," said Germain, "this matter shall terminate according to your wishes."

"But what extraordinary coquetry is this which she is practising towards that Blue Domino?" exclaimed the Prince, aside to his faithful dependant. "Look how timidly and bashfully she hovers round him—while he does not move an inch! Surely it is some statue that is perched up there—and not a being of warm flesh and blood: else never would he remain thus apathetic while so heavenly a creature is endeavouring to win his attention."

"Your Royal Highness will pardon me," said Germain; "but he is evidently contemplating her through his mask with an absorbing interest. My opinion is that each one has got a particular appointment and that neither is convinced that the other is the person expected."

"Yes—it must be something of that sort, Germain," observed the Prince; "and the misunderstanding or uncertainty becomes every instant more embarrassing. The Blue Domino remains stationary—the Flower Girl advances timidly—and now she passes him by—and they do not speak! But this is extraordinary, Germain—and I have a very great mind to accost the fair one and propose myself as her companion——"

"Your Royal Highness may spoil all by so precipitate a course," said Germain. "Let us see the result of this curious dumb-show and bye-play, and be led by circumstances."

"And if the unknown charmer should find her expected *beau* either in that Blue Domino or in some similar masque?" said the Prince.

"Then it will be difficult to bring matters to the issue desired by your Royal Highness," returned Germain. "But an idea has just struck me, may it please——"

"Well—what is this idea?" demanded the Prince.

"That there is no appointment at all on the part of this lady," answered the valet; "but that she is a jealous wife or mistress, on the look out for a faithless husband or a perfidious lover."

"Egad! the idea is not a bad one, Germain," exclaimed his Royal Highness. "But what is she doing now? She advances as far as the musicians—she turns abruptly—she retraces her way—Ah! and now they speak——"

"And there is evidently nothing cordial between them, your Royal Highness," observed Germain.

"Upon my word, I am not sure," said the Prince: "he takes her hand——"

"And now she repulses him," added Germain. "Ah! the interview is over—there is some disagreeable discovery——"

"Or else some very embarrassing mistake," observed the Prince. "But away she goes—we must follow her—and if she should leave the theatre and take a hackney-coach or a cab, Germain——"

"I understand what to do, your Royal Highness," said the astute valet, as he followed his master in pursuit of the Flower Girl.

But here we must take leave of the Prince of Wales and Germain for the present, and return to Lord Montgomery, whom we likewise left hastening after that same mysterious lady.

Cursing his folly for having allowed a single moment to elapse ere he sped in chase of the enchanting creature, he was actually forcing his way through the crowd of masques, when a gentle hand caught him by one of the folds of his domino, and a voice of musical softness said in a tone of timid inquiry, "Lord Florimel?"

Montgomery stopped instantaneously, but gave no immediate answer. For this circumstance threw him all in a moment into an unspeakable bewilderment;—inasmuch as the masque who had thus accosted him was a lady of fine figure, and habited as a Circassian Slave.

Were there, then, *two* heroines in the present adventure?—were *two* fair ones in the secret of the overture made to Lord Florimel by means of the masquerade-ticket and the blue domino? Or was there some grand mistake somewhere?—and if so, which was the legitimate and real heroine—the Flower Girl or the Circassian Slave?

Swift as the shadow of a flight of birds passes over a field when the sun is shining brightly, did these thoughts traverse the brain of Earl Montgomery;—and with the same rapidity did his eyes sweep the form of the lady who had accosted him.

And what was the result of this survey? He observed that she was quite as tall as the Flower Girl and somewhat stouter; indeed, that she possessed the *embonpoint* of a woman of riper age, and whose charms have acquired the luxuriant voluptuousness of maturity in place of the first freshness of youth. He noticed, therefore, that her bosom was of large proportions, but still preserving a firmness unmarred by its fulness; and that at all events it was of the purest virginal whiteness. Her shoulders were well

filled out—slightly rounded—and beautifully sloping;—and her waist was of a symmetry properly consistent with the amplitude of this magnificent bust and the large projection of the hips. Her arms were of sculptural massiveness, but admirably moulded—round, plump, and of dazzling whiteness;—and her hands were perfectly ravishing with their long taper fingers and their pellucid almond-shaped nails. Her feet and ankles were of corresponding beauty;—and altogether her form, from the throat to the sole of the foot, was of a splendour and a voluptuousness which denoted a woman grandly handsome and fervently impassioned. For who could doubt that the black silk mask concealed a face whose features were in perfect keeping with the richness of contour, the fineness of proportion, and the elegance of figure which we have endeavoured to describe?

Lord Montgomery's eyes, in sweeping over the lady's person, embraced at a glance all that we have taken some minutes to delineate.

"Yes—I am Lord Florimel," he said at length, and with a voice as effectually disguised as when he exchanged those brief and rapid observations with the Flower Girl. "And are you, lady, that same adorable but mysterious creature who fifteen months ago——"

"Hush, my lord—hush!" murmured the Circassian Slave, although Montgomery was speaking only in a whisper. "You remember the promise which I then made you——"

"Yes—that we should meet again, dear lady," continued the Earl: "but an age has elapsed since then—and I began to fear that the pledge on your part would be never kept."

"Then you have wished to meet me again, Gabriel?" said the lady, in a voice trembling with ineffable emotions; and she walked slowly aside with Earl Montgomery as she thus spoke.

"Oh! how can you ask me, adorable creature?" exclaimed the nobleman, who remembered, as his looks now dwelt devouringly upon her superb form, all that Florimel had told him of the impassioned ardour and frenetic desires which animated the heroine of his four hours' enjoyment: and the Earl felt his own imagination already wandering amidst those elysian blisses which had been so faithfully described to him, and of which the mysterious being now by his side was at the time alike the creatress and the partaker.

"I ask you whether you wished to meet me again, Gabriel," said the lady, in reply to his own ejaculatory observation,—"because it is sweet to receive such an assurance—and because I must learn, ere we proceed farther in the renewal of our amour, whether you are prepared to be as docile, submissive, and obedient to all I shall suggest or require, as you were upon the former occasion?"

"Dearest lady, do you imagine that by word or deed on my part I would forfeit the bliss which is derived from your society?" asked Lord Montgomery, still speaking in a low and assumed tone: and it struck him that through the holes in the lady's mask came burning looks vibrating with desire.

Then, as from behind his own mask he fixed his eyes more ardently than before upon the splendid form of the Circassian Slave, his devouring looks sought to penetrate through her very garments and feast as it were upon the charms of her entire person,—so that in imagination did he finish and complete all the flowing lines which traced the contours of her shape, and all the inflections and swelling reliefs of her luxuriant figure,—until her apparel grew diaphanous, and her whole form became visible through the transparent vesture. Then, still giving the rein to his wanton fancy, he felt as if he were already folding in his embrace that fine person and revelling in all the sensuous enjoyment of its charms;—and maddened by the desires which were consuming him, he seized her hand, murmuring in that tone of half-suffocation which is caused by extreme emotion, whether of bliss or pain—"Lady, dear lady, let us depart to thine abode of love, and mystery, and pleasure!"

"Yes—we will hasten away from this scene which has no longer any attractions for me, since I have encountered you, my Gabriel," returned the Circassian Slave, her voice trembling with a profound sigh of pleasure.

At that moment Lord Montgomery perceived the Flower Girl standing at a little distance and evidently surveying himself and his companion with the most absorbing attention; and suspecting that her views were far from friendly if not downright mischievous,—though who she was or what her aims might be, he could not for the life of him conjecture,—he hastened to lead the Circassian Slave away from the busy, brilliant scene.

"Do you know that female masque who seemed to be watching us?" inquired the lady in a voice suddenly denoting a profound agitation as she quickened her pace.

"Who?—the Flower Girl?" said Lord Montgomery, now absolutely hurrying the Circassian Slave along towards the nearest avenue of egress. "No—I do not think that she was paying any attention to us——"

"But I am certain she was," interrupted the lady, with a strong emphasis. "Ah! Florimel, 'tis some fair one who loves you—who knows that you were coming hither disguised—and who surveys me with all the rage of jealousy! Heavens—if there should be a scene—a disturbance——"

And Lord Montgomery not only felt his unknown companion's hand trembling nervously, but also observed her entire frame vibrating and quivering with alarm.

"Fear nothing, lady—we are neither watched nor followed," he said, in a tone of joyous reassurance, after having cast a rapid glance behind.

"Oh! what a weight is lifted from my soul!" murmured the Circassian Slave, likewise looking hastily back and perceiving that the Flower Girl was now in earnest conversation with a female masque representing a Gipsy. "But I feel as if I should faint, Gabriel—the terror I have experienced has been, cruel—and now this sudden reaction——"

"Will you not be able to reach your carriage, dearest lady?" inquired Montgomery, in a tone which evinced his alarm although he still had the presence of mind to disguise his voice.

"No—I fear not—a faintness is coming over me——Oh! for a glass of water!" murmured the Circassian Slave, now supporting herself in such a manner that her two arms were passed as it were in his own and her bosom leant against his shoulder.

Fortunately they at this moment emerged from the midst of the masquerade-scene and entered the corridor whence opened the lower tier of boxes—as

"Now then, fust coach there!" exclaimed the fellow;—and up drove a vehicle into which the Flower Girl immediately ascended. "Where to, ma'am?" was the next and last demand.

"To some respectable hotel," replied the Flower Girl, after a few moments' reflection.

"All right!" ejaculated the man, banging the door and touching his hat for the silver coin which the Flower Girl dropped into his hand.

And away drove the hackney-coach: but Germain, who had stripped off his mask and domino, was seated by the side of the coachman upon the box—and after a few minutes' conversation together, the valet handed five guineas to that individual, who secured them about his person, chuckling at the handsome amount of the bribe given for so easy a service as that which was required from him.

In about ten minutes the coach stopped; and down jumped Germain to open the door.

"What hotel is this?" inquired the Flower Girl, looking up and observing what appeared to her to be only a row of handsome private houses.

"The St. James's Family Hotel, ma'am," said Germain, officiously letting down the steps and handing the Flower Girl out of the vehicle.

Meantime the coachman had rung and knocked at the house door, which was almost instantaneously opened; and the appearance of a female servant with a candle in her hand reassured the Flower Girl, if indeed she had even for a moment entertained a suspicion that anything was wrong.

The night was piercing cold—eleven o'clock had struck—and therefore it was no wonder if Germain hurried the Flower Girl into the house: while the promptitude of his proceedings and the despatch which characterised the attentions he thus appeared to be showing to the lady, left her not an instant to ask herself who the courteous and obliging individual could possibly be. But as the light, which the female servant held in her hand, flashed upon his countenance, it instantly struck the Flower Girl that his features were not altogether unfamiliar to her. Still she had no time to pause and reflect where or when she had seen that genteel-looking man in black before,—for the female servant began to lead the way up a handsome and well-lighted staircase.

The Flower Girl followed mechanically—and she had just begun to reflect that it was somewhat extraordinary that such prompt and even officious attentions should be shown her, a stranger though she were at the house and not having even opened her lips to express what she required,—coming too alone at that hour of the night and in a masquerade dress;—upon all these points had she begun to reflect, we say—and a distant suspicion had even raised its nascent glimmering in her mind—when the servant threw open the door of an apartment, saying, "Walk in, if you please, madam."

The Flower Girl paused for an instant: then, feeling how ridiculous her hesitation would seem if her faint misgiving should prove unfounded, she threw her cloak upon a chair on the landing and advanced boldly forward.

The door closed behind her—she found herself in a large, handsomely furnished, and well-lighted room—and a tall figure, disguised in the garb of a Turk and wearing a mask upon his countenance, advanced to receive her.

"There must be some terrible mistake in all this," exclaimed the Flower Girl, stepping back and glancing round uneasily towards the door.

"No, charming lady," said the Turk; "there is no mistake, I can assure you! A little stratagem has been adopted, it is true—but you will pardon me, I feel convinced. And now let me introduce myself to you as Mr. Harley," added the Prince, removing the mask from his features.

"And I," said the lady whose whole frame had quivered violently when the familiar sound of the heir-apparent's voice first struck upon her ears, but who had recovered all herself-command and natural strength of mind ere he had brought his speech to a conclusion;—"and I," she exclaimed, slowly removing the satin mask from her own countenance "am Pauline Clarendon!"

CHAPTER CXLV.

THE HEIR-APPARENT AND THE SISTER OF HIS VICTIM.

A SUDDEN stupefaction appeared to seize upon the Prince of Wales the moment that the melodious but firm voice of Pauline breathed her well known name and that her fair hand took the satin covering from her lovely face.

Shame and humiliation were the first feelings which he experienced as the stupor of astonishment began to subside;—and then the fiendish thought suddenly struck him that as Pauline was ravishingly beautiful, there was no reason why he should not make an attempt upon her virtue.

On the other hand, the hatred which Pauline Clarendon bore towards the Prince of Wales, whom she loathed and detested as the cause of her sister's ruin and misfortunes, inspired her with feelings which not only prevented her from experiencing any apprehension on account of the position wherein she was now placed, but even prompted her to seize this opportunity of unfolding her sentiments upon certain matters.

"Upon my soul, this is the most remarkable coincidence that ever happened!" exclaimed the Prince of Wales at length. "But did you not observe me at the masquerade just now, Pauline?"

"Base and black indeed must your heart be," said the young lady, every lovely lineament of her countenance expressing the magnitude of the resentment and aversion which filled her soul,—"since you can so readily adopt a tone of insolent familiarity towards the sister of your victim!"

"You know that I am profoundly grieved for all that has happened in respect to Octavia," said the Prince: "but I really could not help it—'twas an ordinary case of love and gallantry the circumstances of which afterwards expanded into an importance and assumed a gravity which I could neither foresee nor prevent."

"The very observations which you have just made, Prince of Wales," exclaimed Pauline, bitterly "prove the truth of my assertion relative to the blackness and baseness of your heart."

"Your words are more than rude, young lady" said the heir-apparent, biting his lip: "but I do not feel disposed to suffer them to goad me into anger. On the contrary, I had rather that you should unburthen your bosom of all and everything you may have to allege against me—and then,

perhaps, the calmer discourse which will follow may tend to place us upon a more friendly footing together."

"There is a certain ambiguity in the latter portion of your remarks which I do not choose to understand," said the Hon. Miss Pauline Clarendon, drawing her fine form up to its full height and assuming the dignified hauteur of a virtue conscious of its own power. "But I will avail myself of your permission," she continued, with a subdued irony in her tone, "to make a few observations on the past. Your Royal Highness dared ere now to assimilate the case of my unhappy sister to those thousand-and-one instances of man's depravity and woman's weakness which are such ordinary episodes in the routine of society. But let me tell you, Prince of Wales, that in this particular amour to which I allude, the man's treachery was steeped in the blackness of Satan's own iniquity, and the woman's frailty was attended by circumstances as palliative in respect to herself as they are pathetic and touching to contemplate or describe. For Octavia loved you—loved you tenderly and devotedly,—not as the heir-apparent to the British throne—but as plain, untitled, and obscure Mr. Harley. Yes—she loved you for yourself only,—believing you to be a private gentleman with nothing extraordinary in your social position. On the contrary, she gave you her heart when you came to our house under circumstances calculated to engender suspicions rather than favourable notions relative to your character: for, if you choose to tax your memory with details doubtless so trifling to one in your position," continued Pauline, her tone of reproach again becoming tinctured with irony, "you will recollect the tale you told us of debts incurred for a friend and a flight from the bailiffs who sought to arrest you for those liabilities. Well, then—it was not as a Prince nor even as a rich man that Octavia regarded you when she gave you her virgin love! No:—it was as a simple gentle-

man, whose pecuniary affairs seemed at least to be involved in embarrassment—it was as the fugitive from pursuing harpies of the law, that you were thus admitted into the sanctuary of her soul! And when once you had obtained admission there, Oh! how soon—how soon did you rifle that shrine of the only gem which it possessed!—how prompt and how tremendous was the havoc made by your sacrilegious hand!—how remorseless was the vandalism of that ruin which you left in a temple where all was bright and holy, pure and uncorrupted, until then!"

"Pauline, you know that I could not repair by marriage the injury which I had done to your sister," said the Prince, somewhat touched by the young lady's reproaches, but assuming a more contrite tone and humbled manner in order to move her by that semblance of penitence and sorrow. "I confess that my conduct was wrong—very wrong: but I beseech you to consider that I was hurried on by an infatuation which I could not control—a passion which swept me along as if with the force of a torrent;—and I solemnly swear, Pauline, that had Satan demanded my soul as the price of Octavia's love, I should have madly embraced the compact. Pity me, therefore, while you blame me——"

"Ah! Prince of Wales," interrupted the Hon. Miss Pauline Clarendon, "your tongue is so used to the ready utterance of passionate avowals, that the same language, with a few trifling verbal alterations, serves likewise in an apologetic sense. But I am not to be deluded by your sophistry: and therefore do I tell your Royal Highness to your face that the heartless treachery practised by you towards my sister, constitutes one of the blackest chapters in your life!"

"Pauline, I will not hear any more!" exclaimed the heir-apparent, now unable to curb his wrath.

"I thought that you had generously accorded me permission to give full vent to my feelings and sentiments upon this topic?" said the young lady, her rich red lips wreathing into a satirical smile.

"Proceed, then—proceed," cried the Prince, subduing his impatience as well as he was able: then to himself he said, "By heavens! she is ravishing in that garb—aye, and also in that angry mood;—and I will gratify my vengeance for all these reproaches at the same time that I will appease the flame of this new passion which devours me!"

"I have but little more to say," continued Pauline, who was too much absorbed in the engrossing topic of her sister's wrongs to observe the peculiar nature of the pre-occupation which seized upon the Prince while he was thus musing to himself. "But I cannot depart hence nor suffer this opportunity to escape without protesting—solemnly protesting, alike in my sister's name and in my own—against that scandalous compromise which, although my own parent was a party to it, I cannot do otherwise than denounce in the strongest terms. Alas! alas! that my infatuated father, dazzled by the false light of empty honours and ruled by the designing woman whom he has made his wife, should have consented to receive a title as the atonement and the propitiation for his outraged daughter's wrongs! But that your Royal Highness may not think so ill of me nor do me so foul an act of injustice as to suppose that I rejoice in the sudden elevation of my family to the rank of nobilty, I now solemnly declare that I look with loathing, with abhorrence, and with shame, upon this gilding which has been spread over an indelible disgrace; and while my heart sickens at the thought that my own father could accept such a compensation for so immeasurable a wrong, I likewise hold in boundless contempt that Royal Family who could have dared in the first instance to offer the miserable bauble of a coronet in return for the priceless gem of a woman's virtue!"

"And now, Pauline, you have said all that you have to say," observed the Prince, with the coolness and heartless indifference of a thorough libertine; "and you will perhaps permit me to speak. But shall we not be seated?" he asked: for throughout the preceding dialogue they had remained standing at a short distance from each other.

"No," replied Pauline: "our interview will terminate in a few minutes—and I am not so wearied that I cannot dispense with a seat while listening to anything that you may have to say."

"Be it so," exclaimed the Prince, for a moment abashed, embarrassed, and even overawed by that dignity which the young lady wore as it were without an effort, and which made her as a mere Woman more powerful in a moral sense than he was as a Prince: but casting off that strange influence which thus dominated him for nearly a minute, he said, "You have reproached me at great length for my conduct towards Octavia—and you have likewise repudiated all idea of adhesion to that species of tacit compromise which has made your father a peer. Well—I have already admitted that my behaviour in respect to your sister was improper and even cruel; and if you can show me what reparation I, as a Prince, and as the heir-apparent to the throne of these realms, can make, you have but to name your demands. Then, as for the compromise, I frankly and candidly acknowledge my conviction that you have spoken the truth in denouncing and disavowing it. But while I thus do justice to your own independence of spirit and virtuous indignation of feeling," continued the Prince, in a tone of courteous hauteur, "I do not hesitate to declare my opinion that since your father is satisfied with the arrangements which have been made, you have no longer a right to complain. Octavia belongs to her sire—and not to her sister!"

"Contemptible sophistry!" ejaculated Pauline, her beauteous countenance becoming red with indignation: and the crimson glow suffused itself over her neck and all that was visible of her virgin bosom.

"Well—it may sound like sophistry to your ears," said the Prince, in an easy and familiar tone—as if he knew that not only the argument was on his side, but that he had a means in reserve of humbling that lovely girl so dignified and so strong in the consciousness of her virtue. "It is also the opinion of the world and the expression of the law, that I thus enunciate: for the parent alone could commence an action for the seduction of his daughter. But let us now take leave of this subject and pass on to another. I presume you fully comprehend that it was in consequence of a stratagem you were brought hither?" said the heir-apparent, with the coolest effrontery imaginable.

"I know that you are capable of any villany, Prince," returned Pauline, a slight shudder passing over her frame as she was thus reminded of the circumstances of her position at so late an hour: but

instantaneously assuming the calm demeanour of courage and self-possession, she said, "Nevertheless, bad as you are, I can scarcely suppose you capable of persevering in an evil intention towards one who turns out to be the sister of your unhappy victim?"

"Candidly speaking, my dear Pauline," answered the Prince, whose desires were excited almost to madness by the charms of the young lady,—"I fell in love with you at the masquerade, solely from the contemplation of your beauteous figure and the indescribable graces of your person; and now that your countenance beams upon me in all its glory, I am not likely to abandon the enchanting hope of possessing you—even though the removal of that mask has revealed to me the features of Pauline Clarendon!"

"This language—to *me!*" exclaimed the young lady, once more becoming crimson with indignation—while her whole form shook as if with a strong spasm passing through it.

"Yes—to you—Pauline," cried the Prince, his libidinous looks gloating upon the charms that were set off so ravishingly by the picturesque costume which displayed rather than concealed them. "And now, without hypocrisy—without subterfuge—without circumlocution—let me tell you frankly and resolutely, that your beauty has excited me to a frenetic pitch, and that you shall be mine, be the consequences what they may!"

"Villain!" ejaculated Pauline, now seriously alarmed: and she flew to the door.

"The bird escapes me not thus easily!" cried the Prince, in a triumphant tone, as the young maiden fruitlessly endeavoured to open the door, which had been locked on the other side. "Come, Pauline—you are a being endowed with good sense and a strong intellect—and you can listen to reason. May I crave your patience for a few moments?"

And his Royal Highness leant against the chimney-piece with the cool complacency of a man who is certain of achieving a victory, or who has the game in his own hands.

"Reason!" ejaculated Pauline, summoning to her aid all the courage and self-possession which she now felt to be requisite to meet the dangers and difficulties of her position: and, moving slowly away from the door, she advanced towards the Prince with an air of confidence which she did not however in reality feel. "Yes—I can listen to reason: but I am at a loss to conceive how anything which you may have to say to me, can deserve that denomination."

"We shall see," said the heir-apparent. "And let me begin by informing you that I watched all your movements and proceedings ere now at the masquerade; and I saw enough to convince me that you have no reason to be satisfied with the conduct of the Blue Domino. So long as I remained in ignorance who the fair Flower Girl could be, I was of course unable to penetrate entirely into the mystery of those proceedings;—but now that I know her to be the beautiful Miss Pauline Clarendon, I come to the very natural conclusion that the Blue Domino must have been her fickle, inconstant, and faithless lover, the young Lord Florimel. Ah! I see by your countenance that my surmise is correct——"

"And wherefore do you thus torture me with these allusions?—wherefore do you seek to probe the anguish which so much perfidy has excited in my breast?" exclaimed Pauline, in an impassioned tone—and the tears started forth upon her long lashes, while her bosom heaved and fell convulsively.

"I was about to observe, my dear Pauline," resumed the Prince, "that——"

"Your Royal Highness will be pleased to forbear from addressing me with a familiarity not warranted by circumstances," said the young lady, in a resolute tone.

"Well, then—I will call you the Hon. Miss Pauline Clarendon, your father being a peer," observed the Prince, with a satirical smile.

"Proceed—proceed," cried the young maiden impatiently: "I am anxious to depart hence. What more has your Royal Highness to say to me?—for as yet I have heard none of the reason to which you requested me to listen."

"Because you have interrupted me," rejoined the Prince. "For I was about to observe that as Lord Florimel has evidently proved faithless to you, and as his conduct was positively outrageous and cruel to a degree, it is impossible that you—a young lady of high spirit and independent disposition—can tamely submit to so gross an insult as to behold your rival, whoever she might be, preferred before your very face—aye, and in defiance of anything that you may have said to the young nobleman when you accosted him so abruptly and then quitted him in such evident anger. What, then, should you do to be avenged upon the perfidious Florimel?—and which species of vengeance would be the most complete? Can you not understand me, Pauline? If not, I must speak more plainly—and in measured words and intelligible language must I recommend that you retaliate in the same spirit and after the same fashion. Become my mistress—accept my protection—and then, when dashing round the Park in your splendid equipage, or seated in your box at the Opera, you may look scorn, defiance, and contempt at the faithless Florimel."

"Wretch!" exclaimed Pauline in a tone vibrating with the terrible indignation which convulsed her entire form and made her face, her neck, and her bosom turn the hue of a peony all in a moment: "wretch! is it possible that you can hold such language to the sister of the too confiding girl whom your villany has robbed alike of her virtue and her intellects? Oh! if I did not interrupt you ere the sentence which contained the odious proposition was completed,—if I did not burst forth at once in all the fury of my outraged and insulted spirit,—it was that amazement paralysed my tongue! Almighty God, is it possible ——Oh! is it possible that this man shall one day reign over the people of England?"

"Yes—by heavens, will I—for you and all the people of England together were made to become my slaves," exclaimed the Prince, yielding to a sudden access of rage. "And now, Miss Pauline Clarendon—the prude—the pattern-maiden—the chaste damsel *par excellence*, I will teach you that what I have said is true and that you were born to be subservient to my desires. No more of your sentimental trash concerning your sister: for your father has reaped his reward! Yes—and even as a Barony sufficed as an atonement for Octavia's defoliated virtue, an Earldom will be clutched by him as ample recompense for Pauline's honour."

"Ah! you throw off the mask completely, Prince?—you proclaim yourself a villain?" cried Pauline, speaking in a tone which sounded like that of

calm defiance, but which was really that of despair. "No—you cannot mean to perpetrate such an outrage? Besides—even if you should attempt it—I will resist until the very death—I will alarm the house—my screams shall arouse the neighbourhood—or, as a last resource, I will leap from the window——"

And as she uttered these words in a voice which had risen from the dull tone of despair to the excitement of an hysterical frenzy, she sprang towards the casement—tore aside the curtains—and rushed into the recess to throw open the window. But her hands only encountered the shutters—and she felt that the iron bar which went across them, was fastened with a padlock!

Staggering back into the room, baffled, disappointed, and with an increasing terror gaining upon her, the unhappy Pauline vainly endeavoured to recall her self-possession: the laugh of the Prince rang half triumphantly, half mockingly in her ears—and a voice seemed to whisper in her soul that she was undone!

"My dear girl," said his Royal Highness, who was still lounging negligently before the fire and had not moved a step to retain her when she flew so wildly towards the window,—"you must think me very foolish indeed, if you imagine that the smallest avenue of escape is left for you. No—no: though ignorant that I had to deal with a stubborn and obstinate prude, yet I came hither with all imaginable speed to make preparations for your arrival, the moment I saw you safely ensconced in the hackney-coach and my faithful Germain mounted on the box."

"Ah!" ejaculated Pauline: "methought that man's face was not unfamiliar to me. But, O God! have mercy upon me," she cried, clasping her hands in despair: "for the wickedness of my persecutors is triumphing in every point!"

"And the conquest will be speedily achieved, dearest Pauline," exclaimed the Prince,—"despite of your screams—your entreaties—your resistance! But rather—Oh! much rather would I that you should come a willing sacrifice to my arms—tender, yielding, and submissive—obedient to that destiny which you cannot resist—making a merit of necessity, and abandoning yourself to the full enjoyment of those ecstatic pleasures——"

"O horror!" moaned the unhappy girl, sinking upon her knees and still clasping her hands with the wildness of despair. "What! will no one come to my assistance?—is it possible that these walls can beat back my screams—my cries for help——"

"Pauline, you must be mad to hope for succour in this house," interrupted the Prince, with a smile of almost fiendish satisfaction: "for if you have not already guessed that you are an inmate of the hospitable dwelling of Mrs. Brace——"

"Mrs. Brace!" repeated the wretched Pauline, springing from her knees to her feet as if she were suddenly electrified: for well she knew that fatal name in connexion with her beloved sister's ruin. "O God! have mercy upon me!" she exclaimed—and then, obedient to the impulse of feelings worked up to a pitch of the most excruciating anguish, she burst forth into screams which would have pierced through the thickest dungeon-wall.

"Peace, silly fool!" cried the Prince, now rushing forward and winding his arms around her form: then, straining her with a species of maddening and ferocious violence to his breast, he exclaimed, "I will stifle thy shrieks with kisses!"

And as he glued his lips, hot and parched with the fever of burning lust, to her delicious mouth, her senses abandoned her—and she remained powerless and inanimate in his arms!

CHAPTER CXLVI.

THE HACKNEY COACH AND THE PRIVATE CARRIAGE.

GRIEVED as we are to leave the reader in a state of suspense relative to the issue of the adventure of Pauline Clarendon and the Prince of Wales, we must nevertheless break the thread of that episode for a short space and return to Covent Garden Theatre.

We left Lord Montgomery and the Circassian Slave at the moment when having issued from the scene of the masquerade, they stopped in a corridor to enable the lady to breathe the fresh air which circulated in that place.

Speedily recovering, and no longer requiring any beverage to quench a thirst that had for a moment seemed intolerable, the Circassian Slave took Montgomery's arm again; and they now proceeded to quit the theatre. Down the grand staircase they went—that man wrapped in the mystery of the blue domino, and that woman whose splendid form was set off to such brilliant advantage by the oriental garb that she wore! And Lord Montgomery felt proud as well as happy in the companionship of this superb creature, the flexible grace and soft voluptuousness of whose entire figure attracted the gaze of the loungers upon the stairs and in the vestibule;—and as he felt her bosom press gently against his shoulder, he hastened his pace—her own of course at the same time—in order to be alone with her as speedily as possible.

"Is your carriage in attendance, dear lady?" he asked, in the same low and assumed tone which he had all along adopted.

"Not here, Gabriel," was the softly uttered response. "We must take a hackney-coach in the first instance——"

"Be it so, dear lady," observed the nobleman. "But have you no cloak to protect yourself against the cold?"

"Ah! I forgot—'tis upon the landing above," said the Circassian Slave, stopping short at the foot of the staircase as she thus spoke. "Here is the duplicate-ticket which I received from the woman who takes charge of the cloaks."

"One moment and I will return," said Lord Montgomery; and, taking the little piece of pasteboard, he hastened up the staircase.

The next instant a tall footman in dark livery accosted the Circassian Slave, and with a respectful salutation, said, "Is the carriage to take up your ladyship here?"

"No, Mason," immediately replied the Circassian Slave. "You will wait for me in Great Russell Street, close by the British Museum; and you will be upon the watch for a hackney-coach. I shall not be alone—and you will adopt with promptitude all the necessary precautions."

The lady spoke with a peculiar significancy which

the domestic evidently comprehended full well: and touching his hat, he instantaneously disappeared. In a few moments Lord Montgomery rejoined the lady, over whose shoulders he threw the handsome cloak which he had been to fetch, and the forgetting of which was a mere stratagem on her part in order to gain the opportunity of issuing her commands to the footman relative to the carriage.

Enveloped in her mantle and leaning upon Montgomery's arm, she now issued from the theatre; and, a hackney-coach being summoned, the disguised pair entered it together.

"Where to, sir?" demanded the driver, addressing the nobleman.

"Great Russell Street, Bloomsbury—and stop opposite the Museum," the lady hastened to reply; —and away went the coach.

"Oh! my dearest friend," murmured Lord Montgomery, now taking the plump warm hand of his companion and pressing it fervently in his own,— "how can I sufficiently thank you for thus remembering me and condescending to renew the ineffable delights of that first occasion when you made me so supremely happy! Ere now in the theatre I had no time to express to you all the gratitude I experience—all the raptures which you have excited in my soul—all the bliss which you have poured into my heart. But now—the first moment that we are really alone together—I hasten to give you the fondest, tenderest, and most fervid assurances of gratitude — love — adoration! O lady—never have I forgotten, even for an instant, those four hours of elysian enjoyment which I tasted in your arms;—and my soul can scarcely believe that so much happiness is in store for it once again—but trembles lest it should awaken from a delicious dream and find all the ecstatic thoughts which now fill it oozing rapidly away, and all the warmth of its blissful emotions turning into the iciness of a stern disappointment."

In this strain did Earl Montgomery continue to speak for some time—his purpose being to postpone as long as possible that moment so perilous to his hopes and his entire stratagem, when the truth must be revealed and the tremendous discovery would be made that he was *not* Lord Florimel. For he had already calculated that if he were only allowed the leisure and the opportunity to excite the passions of this woman whose nature was so ardent and whose desires were so uncontrollable, he would be certain to carry out his adventure to a successful issue and triumph over any feeling of anger or alarm which the discovery of the imposture might raise up in the bosom of the wanton lady. In a word, his purpose was to reduce her to the absolute necessity of accepting himself as a substitute for the lover whom she hoped to meet;—and as he pretty well guessed that the ride in a hackney-coach to Great Russell Street was only one of the many precautions which the crafty lady was wont to adopt, and that some other vehicle would receive them at that spot in order to convey them elsewhere, he calculated that it would be far more conducive to the success of his scheme to maintain the cheat until they were within the close vicinage of their ultimate destination, wherever it might be.

And fortunate, perhaps, was it for the success of the Earl's stratagem that the lady had taken the hired vehicle in the first instance. For had she at once entered her own carriage in company with Montgomery, she would have instantaneously taken off her mask and torn the satin vizard likewise away from his countenance in order to pour forth her voluptuous soul in the caresses which she would have lavished upon him. His whiskers would then have revealed to her all in a moment that he was *not* the young nobleman whom she had hoped and expected to meet; and in the first fury of her rage terror, and disappointment, she might have indignantly ordered the intruder to quit her carriage—a command which, as a gentleman, he would have been bound to obey.

Such might have been the sudden result of the adventure had the private carriage been used in the first instance. But, as it was, the Circassian Slave did not think it worth while to disturb her own mask immediately, inasmuch as it would be necessary to resume it again on passing from the hackney-coach to the carriage: she accordingly restrained her longings to press her lips to those of her companion;—and, contenting herself by reclining her head on his shoulder and abandoning her hand to his pressure, she listened in a dreamy and sensuous rapture to the glowing language which he poured into her ears with all the deep tenderness of his whispering voice.

In a little less than ten minutes the hackney-coach stopped; and Montgomery heard some one say to the driver, "You need not get down—I will open the door—and here is your fare."

Immediately afterwards the door of the hackney-coach was opened by a tall man who had on a great-coat such as was worn in those times by footmen in livery; and his hat was put on in such a way as to shade his countenance. Montgomery instantly remembered *the tall lacquey* mentioned by Lord Florimel, and felt convinced that this was the same.

The moment the door of the vehicle was opened, the Circassian Slave hastened to alight; and the Earl immediately followed her. The instant his feet touched the pavement, he darted a rapid glance up and down the street to ascertain if a carriage were in attendance; and he had just time to observe that there was an equipage standing in the deep shade thrown by the gate-way of the British Museum, when the hood of his domino was pulled completely over his mask and he was thus involved in utter darkness. At the same moment he heard the hackney-coach drive away;—and he was then hurried along towards the spot where he had observed the carriage standing.

The vigorous arms which thus dealt so unceremoniously with him, again reminded him of Lord Florimel's history and seemed to confirm his belief that the man in the great coat and the slouched hat was the same tall footman who figured in that narrative.

Into the carriage was he now promptly hoisted;— and as the door closed behind him, he was received in the arms of the lady who had already taken her place in the vehicle.

"My own dearest Gabriel," she exclaimed, in a tone full of passion, and joy, and anxious longing, as the carriage drove rapidly away,—"we may now embrace each other and exchange kisses of love and tenderness!"

And as she thus spoke, she threw back the hood of Montgomery's domino—tore the mask from his countenance—and glued her lips to his mouth with all that frenzied ardour and devouring fury which Lord Florimel had so glowingly described.

"Pardon — pardon, dearest lady," murmured the Earl, straining her to his breast.

"O God! who are you?" she cried with a faint shriek;—and, tearing herself from his arms, she appeared to fall back upon the opposite seat in a state of utter annihilation.

The nobleman fell upon his knees in the carriage and took her hand, which was abandoned to him as if by one in a dream or in a mood of utter listlessness. He pressed it to his lips—and he felt that it was warm, although it trembled not nor indicated any emotion on the part of its owner. But that she had not fainted, he could tell by its soft warm contact; and moreover he heard the low but quick and stifling manner of her respiration. The interior of the vehicle was dark as pitch: but by all that we have just explained, the Earl judged that the lady must have fallen into that state of mingled despair and bewilderment which occasions a total helplessness.

"Pardon me, adorable woman—pardon me!" he exclaimed, throwing as much tender entreaty as possible into that manly tone which he no longer sought to disguise. "It is true that Lord Florimel kneels not at your feet: but he who has taken his place and now implores your compassion—your forbearance—your mercy, is as honourable a man. And what is more, I may without vanity declare that in personal appearance I am not deficient in some of nature's bounties. Whether my manners are those of a vulgarian or a gentleman, I leave you to judge;—and as for my rank, it is even superior to that of Lord Florimel. But if you would ask me whether I can appreciate as well as he the full amount of that happiness which is to be enjoyed in your society,—if you should entertain any misgiving with regard to the obedience I may be disposed to pay to the terms and conditions you will impose upon me,—and if you doubt the prudence of trusting yourself to a stranger under circumstances so strange,—Oh! I beseech you to be reassured on those points—I implore you to place your confidence in me—and you will render me the happiest as well as the most devoted of mortals!"

As Lord Montgomery was giving utterance to this impassioned address, he gradually drew himself in closer contact with the lady who was half-sitting and half-reclining on the seat: he leant softly towards her—he passed his left arm gradually round her form, still retaining her hand clasped in his right,—and he at length approached his own countenance to her burning cheek. Then at last he felt her whole frame vibrate:—and drawing her still more closely towards him, he ventured to fasten his lips to her's.

For a few moments she appeared to abandon herself to the ecstatic feelings with which that long and sensuous kiss inspired her: but, as if all in a moment awakening to a full sense of her position with a stranger and to a keen appreciation of the infamous trick which had been played upon her, she started from the Earl's embrace and repulsed him violently, exclaiming in a tone profoundly troubled, "Who are you?"

"I am a friend of Lord Florimel, dear lady," was the response delivered in a voice of tender appeal and mournful entreaty; "and I happened to be at his house when the masquerade-ticket and the domino arrived. The conversation which ensued, led him to narrate the adventure of love and mystery that happened to him fifteen months ago; and when he declared that his engagement to the Hon. Miss Pauline Clarendon would not permit him to keep the appointment so unmistakably signified through the medium of the masquerade-ticket and the blue domino, the idea struck me that if he were so stoical as to refuse the bliss of heaven I would at least make a desperate effort to secure that enjoyment for myself."

"And was he privy to your imposture?—did he lend himself to your treachery?" demanded the lady, in a low deep tone which afforded no indication of the feeling that she now entertained towards the Earl—neither encouraging him in hope nor yet confirming him in despair: and as the darkness of the tomb prevailed in the vehicle, he had no means of judging her emotions save by her voice, which thus suddenly ceased to be an index.

"No, lady," he said, in answer to her questions: "Lord Florimel is utterly ignorant of my present proceeding—and I hope to God that he will remain so. Intimate as I am with him, it was easy for me to obtain possession of this blue domino; and I trusted to my own prudence and your kindness for the rest. And will you not believe me when I assure you that, although I have not seen your features and am never likely to obtain a glimpse of them, yet that I already love you with an ardour—oh! with an ardour which would make me undertake any enterprise and dare any peril to render you a service—while not even the temptation of a sovereign crown should induce me to do you harm. Permit me, then, to love you, my worshipped unknown—permit me to be thy slave, thou being so full of mystery! For the graces of thy form have captivated my heart and ravished my senses—and I already picture to myself a countenance of corresponding beauty. Without therefore even beholding that countenance, I can love thee well—oh! well—dear lady: for I can paint in imagination those features which I deem fit and suitable for one possessing so noble a form — and thus my happiness will be complete! Will you, then, scorn such a love as this?—will you reject a passion so earnest, so tender, and so profound? No: but you will pardon me for anything savouring of treachery that there may have been in my conduct—you will forgive me for the imposture which I practised in order to obtain this introduction to thee? For my imagination was so inflamed by the narrative which I received from the lips of Lord Florimel, that I was absolutely tortured with an excruciating curiosity to form thine acquaintance—yes, and maddened with a burning desire to obtain thy love! My crime, then, has been to adore thee from hearsay — to worship thee on account of all I heard concerning thee from another;—and surely there is something delicately flattering and touchingly complimentary in all this, which would disarm even the most imperious and haughty woman of her indignation. Speak, lady—oh! speak—and tell me what I am to expect: but remember that this passion which I now experience is stronger than myself—and terrible indeed would prove its disappointment and its despair!"

At the moment when Earl Montgomery commenced this long address, the lady had withdrawn herself altogether from the slightest contact with him: not a portion of her oriental garb touched his blue domino—at least so far as she could prevent such contiguity in the total darkness of the

carriage. But by degrees as he spoke, and as his voice gradually grew more tender, his language more impassioned, and his manner more appealing, he insinuated himself as it were closer and closer to the Circassian Slave; and she evidently became interested in his speech and evinced a soft yielding in her own conduct, by not withdrawing herself in proportion as he drew nearer to her. Thus was it that his hand presently touched her own—and the Earl felt every nerve in his frame vibrate with pleasure at the warm contact. Then he took that hand—and gently, gently he sank down until he was upon his knees again—and he pressed the hand to his heart as he continued in the fervid strain which we have described.

By degrees he felt the hand trembling in his own—then the arm was more completely abandoned to him;—and gradually did he become aware that the entire form of the lady was approaching nearer and nearer towards him. At length her breath fanned his cheek—he could even hear the pulsation of her heart as its beating indicated the trouble of conflicting emotions — and in a few instants a smooth forehead was laid upon his own. Then with apparent timidity did he circle her waist with his arms; and as the last words of his impassioned appeal fell from his lips, she threw herself upon his breast, murmuring in a faint and tremulous tone, "Yes—I pardon thee—I pardon thee!"

Ecstatic was the thrill of triumph which passed through the form of Montgomery as these words fell upon his ears; and in the next moment, burning was the kiss which he imprinted upon the moist plump mouth of his charming unknown. And he felt her entire person undulate with a soft, gradual, and sensuous writhing, as that kiss seemed to pour floods of transport in unto her soul; while low and scarcely articulate accents of pleasure escaped in a continuous billing murmur from her lips—so that the depth of this ardent woman's passion resembled the cord of a harp which curls with a wavy movement and gives forth a gentle humming sound when thrown upon the scorching hearth.

But all of a sudden the mysterious unknown seemed to recollect herself again and once more recover at least a considerable portion if not the whole of her presence of mind: for gently but firmly disengaging herself from the nobleman's embrace, she said, "You have not yet told me who you are."

"Lady, it was an oversight, but unintentional, I can assure you," returned the patrician: "for, if you will remember, I alluded to my rank when I declared it to be superior to that of Lord Florimel."

"Then, without farther preface, who are you?" demanded the lady in a somewhat peremptory tone.

"I am the Earl Montgomery," was the response.

It seemed to the nobleman that a strong spasm shook the lady's form as he thus proclaimed himself: at least he fancied that he caught that abrupt kind of start which is perceived in the midst of an intense darkness only by the sudden rustling which it occasions to the dress. But he was not sure: and as a profound silence and a complete immoveability instantaneously followed on the part of the lady, he began to think that he must have been mistaken and that instead of the announcement of his name and rank having produced any particular effect upon her, she was even now meditating what course she ought to pursue.

"She doubtless knows me by reputation," he thought within himself; "and she mistrusts me. She has perhaps heard that I am dissipated—gay—addicted to women—and loose in money matters; and she trembles at the idea of pushing this adventure any farther. It is even possible that she may know me—that we are acquaintances—that we have met in the saloons of fashion—and that she entertains an antipathy towards me, or a dread that I should discover who she is. And yet I have not the slightest suspicion who she can be! But then I am acquainted with so many ladies of splendid figure; and moreover those whom I have been accustomed to see in their ordinary apparel, would appear in a different light and to greater or lesser advantage in the fancy costume of a Circassian Slave. No—assuredly I cannot think of any one, within the range of my acquaintance, whom I can identify with my mysterious companion. Or rather, I remember a dozen whose superb forms would probably look equally well if similarly attired. But how can I pick out one of those and fix upon her as my unknown charmer opposite? No—all is mystery in that respect;—and whether we are indeed known to each other in the glittering world of fashion, or whether we are total strangers, her secret seems safe enough. Why, then, does she thus appear to hesitate?"

These reflections occupied about a minute, during which the Circassian Slave continued silent and motionless, as if she were plunged in the profoundest reverie.

"And you are Eugene Montgomery?" she at length said, with so peculiar an expression in her tone that the Earl could not for the life of him at the moment determine whether it were indicative of satisfaction, swayed by astonishment, or influenced by vexation. "I have heard of your lordship—yes—I have heard of you——and report represents you as somewhat wild and unsteady. But still—you are handsome—yes—very handsome, Eugene," she continued, her voice suddenly becoming kind and tender beyond all possibility of mistake;—"and your nature is fervid and impassioned! Oh! let me then hesitate no longer," she cried, in a gushing enthusiasm of voice, manner, and feelings: "but let me devote myself to love and pleasure, with you as my companion! Yes, Eugene—I pardon you for the perfidy which you practised in order to be received as a substitute for your friend; and I rely upon your honour that Lord Florimel shall remain ignorant of all this. Not that he is now anything to me—or ever was—otherwise than as the object of a transitory caprice which seized upon me fifteen months ago and which revived again this week. Nor do I dread discovery: for the precautions I adopted with him and shall adopt this night with you, defy the utmost keenness of penetration and the deepest searching of curiosity. Nevertheless I would not that these adventures should become a common topic of conversation, inasmuch as they might be alluded to in my presence and cause me to experience a temporary confusion. If, then, you be really grateful for the pardon which I have accorded you, Eugene—and if you only entertain towards me one hundredth part of all those impassioned feelings which you ere now depicted so eloquently,—you

will swear to maintain an inviolable secrecy respecting the incidents of this night?"

"I swear, beloved lady," exclaimed Lord Montgomery. "Besides, you have this guarantee—that I do not wish to forfeit Florimel's friendship; which I should assuredly do, were he to discover the part that I have played towards you and which he little expected or intended his narrative to suggest. And now, dear lady, are you satisfied?"

"Yes, Eugene—perfectly," was the reply:—"and thus do I convince thee of the sincerity of my word," she added, throwing herself into his arms and abandoning herself to his fervid caresses.

Almost immediately afterwards the carriage stopped; and in an instant did the lady draw the hood of the domino over the Earl's head and tie a silk handkerchief around it in such a manner that neither the night-breeze nor any movement on his part could throw that cowl back.

The door of the vehicle was opened: the Circassian Slave descended first—and, guided by her hand, Lord Montgomery followed. Then ensued precisely the same circumstances which Lord Florimel had detailed in that particular portion of his narrative which referred to his own introduction to the lady's abode of love and mystery. For the Circassian Slave now led Earl Montgomery hastily forward: *a gate closed behind them—on they went—and it struck him that they were threading the gravel-walk of a garden or similar enclosure. In a couple of minutes they paused: the lady let go his hand for a moment—he heard a key turn in a lock—a door opened—his hand was again taken in the warm grasp that gave him a re-assuring pressure—they entered some building—and once more did the lady pause to shut and fasten the door behind them. She then conducted him up a staircase so thickly carpetted that even the clumsiest boots and the heaviest footsteps must have passed noiselessly over it;—and finally he was escorted along a passage into a chamber the atmosphere of which was warm and perfumed!*

There must we leave the nobleman and his mysterious but enchanting companion for the present.

CHAPTER CXLVII.

THE MURDERESS AND HER ACCUSER.

While Pauline Clarendon and the Prince of Wales were brought into contact on the one hand, and while Lord Montgomery was in the carriage with the unknown lady on the other, an incident of a very different nature occurred on this night of multiform adventures.

Mrs. Brace was seated alone in her parlour, pondering upon many things and from time to time cheering her spirits with some excellent Madeira,—when Harriet suddenly made her appearance with a countenance as pale as death.

"What, in heaven's name, is the matter?" inquired the milliner, starting from her seat and instantaneously catching the infection of her abigail's dismay.

"That dreadful man—who was here the other morning—and who would not give his name—but who looks like a constable," gasped Harriet, almost suffocated by the terror that was upon her.

"Ah! what can he possibly want?" murmured Mrs. Brace in a dying tone: and, a horrible sensation coming over her, she clung to the mantel-piece for support.

"My God! my God!" exclaimed Harriet hysterically, and wringing her hands at the same time: "what shall we do?"

"For heaven's sake compose yourself!" said the milliner, all in a moment nerving herself with the courage of despair. "I know who he is—'tis Mobbs—and he is accessible to bribery. Besides, if he has come alone, he means no mischief——"

"Yes—he is alone," observed Harriet, catching eagerly at the hope which her mistress thus suddenly held out: "and he spoke civilly enough when he asked to see you, ma'am."

"Then introduce him at once—and fear nothing," said Mrs. Brace, assuming a tone of firmness and assurance.

The lady's-maid quitted the room; and during the few instants that the milliner remained alone, she exerted all the energy of her nature to tranquillise her feelings and compose her looks. For in spite of the soothing words which she had spoken to Harriet and with which she had even essayed to cheat herself into a belief of thorough security, a tremendous misgiving nevertheless lay like a weight of lead upon the guilty woman's soul. She felt a pain in the chest—a singular sensation, like that of collapse, in the stomach—and a tingling in all her limbs;—and when she drew a long breath, it seemed as if she were struggling to throw some heavy load off her. These were the symptoms of her awful alarm—the tortures which conscience inflicted upon her;—and despite the almost superhuman efforts which she made to conquer these feelings, it was in a horrible state of mind, though with a somewhat tranquillised countenance, that she met the looks of Mobbs as he appeared upon the threshold of her apartment.

The man was dressed in his drab great-coat—wore his slouching hat—carried a short but thick stick in his hand—and was followed by the ugly mongrel dog which went about with him when he was not very particularly engaged. Altogether, he looked a much greater ruffian than nine-tenths of the London rogues and rascals who were wont to tremble at his name;—and a glacial shudder passed through the milliner's entire form, penetrating even to the marrow of her bones, as she beheld his sinister eyes settling upon her with a frightful significancy.

And Mobbs saw how she quailed beneath his look and how her body writhed with the paroxysm of a profound and searching terror;—and he said within himself, "The Gallows' Widow was right—and the milliner is a murderess!"

"Walk in, Mr. Mobbs—and sit down," said the wretched woman, straining every nerve to seem composed, but enduring tortures so horrible that every instant appeared an age and she felt as if she must either give vent to her excruciating sensations in a piercing scream or else be suffocated by the endeavour to subdue her emotions.

"How are you, ma'am?" said Mobbs in his usual growling tone. "Come here, you ugly thief—will ye?" he cried, thus elegantly apostrophizing his dog, and bestowing a kick on the animal at the same time: then, closing the parlour door, he advanced into the room and took a seat near the fire, saying, as he chucked his hat upon the carpet, "It's a cold night, ma'am."

"Then you shall take something nice and warm, Mr. Mobbs, to comfort you," exclaimed the milliner,

slightly gathering courage from the familiarity of his conduct; but as she placed the spirit-bottles upon the table her hand shook visibly and her whole frame trembled with the same nervous agitation.

"Thank'ee, ma'am—I'll help myself to a drop of brandy," said Mobbs; and as he spoke he more than half filled a tumbler with the potent spirit, adding a very moderate quantity of hot water and thrusting his dirty fingers into the sugar-basin to extract a couple of the largest lumps.

"And now what has brought you hither this evening, Mr. Mobbs?" inquired the milliner, affecting to be busily employed in snuffing the candles in order that she might avert her countenance as she spoke: then, although the words half suffocated her to give utterance to them, she said, "Any tidings of your friend Mr. Grumley?"

"Well—not exactly, ma'am," returned Mobbs, exhaling that peculiar sigh of pleasure which with many persons follows a draught of some strong and agreeable beverage: "leastways, I can't say as yet——"

"Ah! then you think you have obtained some clue respecting him?" cried Mrs. Brace, still keeping her countenance turned from Mobbs: for she *felt* that the agonies of her suspense might be read in the workings of her features.

"Well—to speak candidly, I think I have, ma'am," said Mobbs: and he emptied his tumbler.

"Won't you take some more? Pray help yourself, Mr. Mobbs," exclaimed the milliner, assuming her most winning tone: and, turning towards him, she threw her agitated looks upon his countenance.

"Thank'ee, ma'am—I'll help myself," he said, meeting her glance and observing that she recoiled from it with a shrinking that extended to her innermost being. "But you was asking me about Grumley—poor Peter Grumley," he continued, in his cold implacable voice; "and I was telling you as how I had obtained or fancied I'd obtained a clue to him."

"And knowing that I felt interested in the matter, you kindly came to acquaint me with the circumstance—is it not so?" said the milliner, nerving herself with that desperate courage which seeks a relief from suspense even at the risk of learning the worst at once.

"Well, ma'am—I can't exactly say it was in such a humour that I called to-night," responded Mobbs, again fixing his eyes most suspiciously upon her: "for the truth is—and the truth may be as well told at once——"

"Oh! certainly," cried the woman, sinking upon a chair with a feeling as if her senses were abandoning her. "The truth——"

"Is that I have reasons to entertain suspicions, ma'am," continued Mobbs, leaning forward as he spoke.

"Ah! suspicions—is it possible?" murmured Mrs. Brace, in a dying tone.

"Yes—suspicions of the strongest nature," proceeded Mobbs, his tone and looks every instant becoming more ominous.

"Against whom?" gasped the milliner, as if her very life depended upon the answer.

"Against *you!*" was the terrific response.

A strong spasm shook the wretched woman from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet—and the natural colour quitting her cheeks and leaving the rouge upon the marble flesh, rendered her positively ghastly. Her livid lips moved quiveringly with the vain attempt to articulate a few words: her voice remained as it were in her throat, held back by an irresistible weight and accompanied by a suffocating sensation. Frozen with dread horror—struck motionless by a tremendous consternation, she sate gazing with haggard eyes upon that ill-looking countenance which was opposite to her, and on which she read an expression of mingled malignity and fiendish cunning.

Ineffable was the anguish endured by the milliner for upwards of a minute! Whole ages of excruciating torture seemed to be condensed into that space. Though awfully aware of the necessity of saying something in reply to the terrific accusation made against her, she could not give utterance to a word;—and though equally alive to the appalling fact that her looks were confirming all the man's suspicions, she was utterly unable to compose her features or even assume the most distant semblance of outraged innocence.

A far less intelligent man than Mobbs would have read *guilt* written on her features, proclaimed by her looks, and apparent in her manner, as plainly as if the word were stamped with a searing-iron upon her brow. He was accordingly convinced beyond all possibility of doubt that the Gallows' Widow had placed him upon the right scent: but he did not wish to act with a precipitation that should lead to an immediate explosion. Indeed, it formed no part of his plan to urge matters to an exposure at all; and therefore he did not contemplate extreme measures with regard to the unhappy woman. He knew that she was rich; and it had been already settled between himself, the Gallows' Widow, and Carrotty Poll, that the knowledge of Mrs. Brace's tremendous secret should be made the means of extorting considerable sums of money from her. This was a game which suited Mr. Mobbs much better than getting himself restored to office by giving publicity to the murder and thereby explaining the real cause of Grumley's disappearance. Therefore, what he now aimed at was to penetrate into the very depths of the milliner's secret and ascertain how she had disposed of the corpse of her victim,—so that he might get her completely into his power and make her purse a constant source of supply for his own behoof by holding her crime in terror over her head.

Such were the man's calculations;—and accordingly, when he had suffered her to endure all the poignancy of that alarm which was certain to render her as docile and submissive as his purposes required, he said in a tone through which he only suffered his meaning to penetrate dimly and ambiguously, "You see, ma'am, that it's of no use to deny the thing—and therefore you'd better make a friend of me."

The milliner started as if from a hideous dream. For her imagination, so intensely tortured, had pictured nothing less than the very worst—her immediate arrest, a full exposure, the horrors of Newgate, and all the consecutive details usually resulting from the discovery of so heinous a crime. But in the words which suddenly broke upon her ears through this awful vision, she beheld a gleam of hope; and instantaneously catching at it with the feverish haste of desperation, even though it should prove only a straw, she said, "What mean you? Explain yourself! How can you serve me as a friend?"

"By not becoming your enemy, to be sure," was the immediate response. "As matters now stand, it is in my power to give you into custody on suspicion of having made away with Peter Grumley——"

"But you will not do so, Mr. Mobbs?—you will not ruin me?" murmured the wretched woman, the words escaping through the chattering of her teeth, and her voice trembling as fearfully as her body.

"Well, ma'am, it would be a pity to send such a handsome creatur' to the scaffold," said the man coolly.

"O God! do not allude to such a horror!" cried Mrs. Brace in an almost shrieking tone;—and falling upon her knees at his feet, the elegant milliner humbled herself like the veriest mendicant to that ill-looking, vulgar, gross-minded ruffian who was himself an assassin—yes, the assassin of his wife and his children!

"Come, get up, ma'am—get up," he said: "it will be your own fault if I hurt you. I'm sure I don't want to make a disturbance about this business—although it's a very orkard one——"

"Is it possible to hush it up?—can money purchase your silence?" inquired the milliner, with an hysterical rapidity of tone, as she sprang from her knees and joined her hands imploringly.

"Well—I dare say we shall be able to come to an understanding, my dear madam," said Mobbs, whose familiarity, which at any other time would have been odious and disgusting to a degree, was now welcomed as a proof of good feeling. "But before we touch on that part of the business, I must know everything."

"Everything?" repeated Mrs. Brace, now wondering for the first time how much he did already know and whence that knowledge was gleaned: and at the same time it struck her that if she had denied the accusation at the very outset and acted with a fortitude proper to the emergency, she would not now be in the power of an unprincipled villain.

"Yes—you must tell me everything," repeated

Mobbs, with a savage emphasis; for he understood all the thoughts that had just traversed her mind. "And you need not fancy that you can baffle me——"

"Oh! no—no—I do not entertain such an idea," said the wretched woman, now perceiving that it was too late to assume the air of innocence and the tone of bravado. "I am at your mercy—and you can deal with me as you choose."

"That's talking more sensible," observed Mobbs. "And now, ma'am," he said, abruptly rising from his seat, "you'll be so kind as to show me where you've deposited the dead body of my poor friend."

"Ah! you wish to ruin me—you mean to expose me!" cried the miserable Mrs Brace, an ice-chill striking to her very heart's core. "My God! my God!" she exclaimed in a frenzied tone, and pressing both her hands to her throbbing brows: "what will become of me?"

"You will ruin and expose yourself if you go on in this manner," said Mobbs, brutally. "Do you want to alarm the whole house? I tell you that I will befriend you if you do as I dictate: but if not——"

"My God! I will not irritate you any more—I will be obedient—passive—docile," murmured the unhappy woman, her teeth chattering with the intense chill of the tremor that was upon her, although the atmosphere of the room was agreeably warm. "What do you require, Mr. Mobbs?—speak—I am at your orders."

"It is now half-past eleven o'clock," said the man, glancing towards the time-piece on the mantel; "and I suppose all your people are pretty well in bed or soon will be. It won't therefore be causing any suspicion if you'll just quietly take a candle in your hand and show me where my poor friend's body is hid. I don't want to know for any reason prejudicial to you—but merely for satisfaction's sake."

"And you will not use the evidence against me?—you will not destroy me?" asked Mrs. Brace, still shuddering visibly.

"If I wanted to do you a mischief, I have sufficient grounds on which to act as matters now stand," replied Mobbs; "and if I had meant it from the very first, I should have arrested you at once. Now do you understand?—and will you be satisfied?"

"Yes—yes—I am satisfied," said the miserable woman.

"Then make haste—take the candle—and do as I bid you," returned Mobbs.

"But if any of my servants should be below?" said Mrs. Brace, in nervous alarm.

"Ah! it's *below*, is it?" muttered Mobbs. "Well," he exclaimed, "go and get your people out of the way—and I'll take a drop more brandy during your absence."

This permission to quit his company and go about as she liked, unwatched and unattended, did more in a single instant to revive Mrs. Brace's courage and inspire her with confidence, than all the man's oaths, promises, and protestations of secrecy, silence, and friendship, could have done in an hour. A gleam of animation even came back to her countenance and a faint smile appeared upon her lips—so immense was the relief she thus suddenly experienced.

Issuing from the parlour, she descended to the servants' hall, where she found Frederick Dray and Harriet in earnest conversation together—the other domestics having retired to rest.

The handsome footman and the pretty lady's-maid were evidently in a state of much uneasiness and alarm; and they were wondering together what could possibly keep Mr. Mobbs so long with their mistress, when this lady herself entered the servants' hall.

"O madam!" exclaimed Harriet, running towards her: "we are so terribly frightened? What does he want?—and is he gone?"

"No—he is not gone," hastily responded Mrs. Brace: "but you have nothing to fear."

"God be thanked!" murmured Harriet, almost fainting with the sudden rebound that her heart gave when thus released from the appalling suspense that had previously held every chord tightened to the extremest tension.

"No—you have nothing to fear," resumed the milliner, in the same quick and excited tone as before; "nevertheless, he knows all — everything——"

"Perdition!" ejaculated Frederick Dray.

"O God!" murmured Harriet, now sinking helplessly upon a chair.

"Yes—he knows everything," continued Mrs. Brace: "but he will not betray us—he will accept a bribe—he will befriend us—and he insists upon my showing him the spot where the body is buried."

"Ah! then he means treachery of some kind—either for now or hereafter," said Frederick Dray: "but I will forestall him," he added, his countenance suddenly expressing a terrible resolution.

"What mean you, my good fellow?" demanded Mrs. Brace, in a whispering tone: but the sinister light which all on a sudden flamed up in her eyes, the ominous contraction of her brow, and the nervous trepidation which shook her entire form, showed plainly enough that she already understood Frederick Dray full well.

"You know what I mean, ma'am," he said, his voice becoming low and thick: and having glanced towards Harriet to assure himself that she did not overhear what was now passing, he fixed his eyes with a bold intelligence upon the countenance of his mistress.

"Yes—I *do* understand you, Frederick," she murmured. "But, my God!—is it necessary—this additional crime——"

"Is *it* necessary," answered Dray. "Bring the villain down into the back kitchen—tell him what tale you will—and as he *returns*——mind, as he returns, I say——I shall spring upon him from the pantry. But you must hasten back to him for fear he should suspect a plant—and in the meantime I will get that girl up to her own room," he added, pointing to Harriet, who was sitting, or rather lying back half-fainting in an arm-chair.

"Be it all as you say, Frederick," observed Mrs. Brace: and she turned hastily away in order to avoid meeting his looks once more—for it seemed as if there were murder in them!

But during the minute she took to retrace her way to the parlour, Mrs. Brace appeared to obtain a wonderful familiarity with crime, as if by the sudden inspiration of Satan;—and ceasing almost instantaneously to look with horror upon another murder, she was led to contemplate it as a necessity, and then to rejoice at the idea as a means of ensuring *her* safety in future.

In this last-mentioned state of mind was it that

she once more stood in the presence of Mobbs, who was just emptying his tumbler as she opened the door.

"Well—is all quiet *below*?" he demanded significantly.

"Yes," replied Mrs. Brace. "Two of the domestics were sitting up: but I sent them to their respective chambers. You may come now, Mr. Mobbs, if you please."

"Lead the way, ma'am—and I'll follow," said the ex-constable. "Come, Toby, you ugly blackguard."

These last words were addressed to his dog, which kept close at his master's heels, as the master himself followed Mrs. Brace, who carried a candle in her hand.

Down to the lower regions of the spacious dwelling they descended; and on reaching the bottom of the stairs, Mrs. Brace paused for a moment under pretext of trimming with a pin the flaring wick of the candle—but really to subdue the sudden feeling of horror which sprang up in her mind as she felt that she was now standing as it were upon the threshold of a new crime. For from the short passage leading to the back kitchen did the pantry open on the right hand; and the woman knew that Frederick Dray was concealed *there* with a murderous intent.

"Be quiet, Toby!" exclaimed Mobbs, in a savage tone to the dog, which was beginning to give vent to a low and peculiar growl in which there was also something plaintive, as if the animal's instinct were already receiving some strange and mysterious attraction towards the spot where murder's dire work was concealed. "Come along, ma'am," said the ex-constable, turning towards Mrs. Brace: "for if you don't act as a guide, this beast will."

The milliner shuddered with a profound sensation of horror: for it seemed to her as if the very instinct of animals were sublimated to the degree of refinement necessary to espy, accuse, and expose the perpetrator of the foul crime of murder!

But gathering all the remains of that moral energy which had been so terribly shaken within the last hour, Mrs. Brace led the way along the passage; and it was a respite to this miserable woman to reflect that *the new crime* was not to be perpetrated until she and Mobbs should be retracing their way *back* from the spot where the murdered victim lay. Thus, even while she had hardened her soul to contemplate the death of her companion as an imperious necessity, she nevertheless experienced an immense relief in the postponement of the fatal instant even for a few minutes!

The passage was threaded: she strained her ears—Oh! how tensely she strained them to catch a sound—the slightest—that might assure her whether Frederick Dray was in the pantry or not;—but all was still in that direction!

She now threw open the door of the back kitchen: but so hideous a sensation of terror once more seized upon her as her eyes fell on the stone that covered the unblest grave of the corpse, that she staggered on the threshold and leant against the door-post for support.

"Ah! I understand," muttered Mobbs, in a tone which would have been inaudible under any less momentous circumstances, but which was as easily heard as the roar of a cannon now that every one of the wretched woman's senses was strung to the extremest tension.

"My God! my God!" she murmured, her teeth chattering and her knees knocking together.

"Come, ma'am—don't take on like this," said Mobbs, gradually divesting himself of his wonted brutality of manner in proportion as he found her getting deeper and deeper into his power: "the thing's done and can't be helped now. So we must make the best of it."

What Mr. Mobbs meant by making the best of a murder, we must leave our readers to judge for themselves; certain however it was that the remark carried a sort of philosophical, or rather desperate consolation to the mind of Mrs. Brace—and she said in a tone of reviving assurance, "You speak truly enough, heaven knows, Mr. Mobbs. But would to God that it had never happened!" she added with the most unfeigned—the most heartfelt sincerity.

"There, ma'am—you see it's just as I told you," observed the ex-constable, pointing towards the dog, who was smelling round *the* very identical stone and giving vent at the same time to a low and hideous sound which can only be described as a subdued moaning howl: "that there animal is as sagacious as a Christian—and I needn't ask *where* my partner has been buried."

Mrs. Brace was about to remind the ex-constable for the tenth time of his promise not to betray her, when she suddenly remembered that the reiteration of the pledge on his part was unnecessary; inasmuch as Frederick Dray was no doubt lying in ambush to silence his lips for ever; and now that she had conquered the first feeling of terror and consternation on revisiting the spot where her victim lay buried, she derived a sudden and strange hardihood from the thought that a *second* crime was about to render the *first* one as safe as it could possibly be made.

But scarcely had this reflection braced her mind with that unnatural courage,—scarcely, too, had Mobbs entered the back kitchen and begun to gaze upon the stone beneath which his murdered superior lay,—when they were both startled by piercing screams which appeared to come from above and penetrate through the floor, and wall, and chamber after chamber, down unto that lowest region of the milliner's establishment.

For a few moments Mobbs paused and listened with breathless attention—as if all his thoughts were in an instant diverted from the murder to this new and suddenly transpiring subject of interest: then, as the shrieks continued in louder waves of thrilling, rending, agonising sound, he yielded to the impulse of his own instincts—and, forgetting that he was no longer a constable nor bound to take notice of any such occurrence, he snatched the candle from Mrs. Brace's hand and darted away like one demented with the dog at his heels.

So sudden was this movement on his part that the rush which he made along the passage struck a panic to the heart and paralyzed the arm of Frederick Dray, who had been holding himself in readiness to spring forth from the pantry; and the club which he had provided for his murderous purpose fell from his grasp.

As for Mrs. Brace, she stood petrified and stricken dumb for a moment,—inasmuch as she suspected only too well whence those rending shrieks emanated, and she was transfixed by the idea of such a ruffian as Mobbs interfering in the matter: but almost at the very next instant the appalling, maddening, hor-

rifying reminiscence shot through her brain that she was now *alone* in the sepulchre of her murdered victim,—and, as the light was rapidly disappearing, she rushed forth from the back kitchen with a shriek of mortal agony.

At the same moment Frederick Dray, having recovered his presence of mind, emerged from the pantry; and the wretched woman, sinking beneath the weight of accumulating misfortunes, threw herself into his arms and fainted. The next instant the light disappeared and total darkness prevailed in that place;—for Mobbs had already gained the top of the staircase leading to the ground-floor—and he had taken the candle with him!

The shrieks continued: he paused for a moment to listen—and his quick ear informed him that they came from premises *behind* those where he now was. A passage leading in that direction met his view—and he rushed along it, shading the light with his hand in order to protect it from the current of air which his rapid progress created. A door barred his way—but it opened to his touch; and, entering another passage, he instantaneously perceived that he had thus forced his way into the house which was at the back of Mrs. Brace's, but the front of which he knew must look upon St. James's Square. The discovery that the two dwellings thus communicated, excited his curiosity, thereby forming an additional impulse to urge him on. At the end of this second passage a door opened into a hall lighted by a lamp, and where a footman was seated in a lounging posture, his whole aspect and manner denoting the most supreme indifference to the sounds of anguish which still came with piercing note from above.

"Holloa! who are you, and what the devil do you want?" cried the footman, now starting to his feet as Mobbs rushed into the hall, followed by his dog.

"Don't you hear that row, you cursed sleepy fool?" demanded the ex-constable savagely;—and, without pausing to hear the flunkey's reply, he sprang up the handsomely-carpetted and well-lighted staircase,—the mongrel keeping close at his heels.

Suddenly the shrieking ceased—but not before the keen and experienced ear of Mobbs had caught the direction whence it came;—and, guided by that clue, he unhesitatingly burst open the door facing the head of the staircase.

"Damnation! what means this intrusion?" demanded a fine, tall, portly man dressed in a Turkish costume, and who held in his arms the senseless form of a lovely creature attired in the picturesque garb of a Flower Girl.

"Why, that rape and ravishment and all kinds of things are going on here," said Mobbs;—"and it's my dooty to perwent them," he added, still forgetting that he was no longer a peace-officer, but obeying the impulse of those habits which had become second nature.

Then, as he thus spoke, he flung aside the candle which he had brought with him, and seizing the Prince of Wales with his right hand, he swung him completely round, while with his left arm he tore the senseless Pauline from the royal voluptuary's embrace.

At the same moment the dog, naturally regarding the Prince as some enemy of his master's and therefore deeming it right and proper to take a due share in the proceedings, flew at the royal legs and began snapping and barking in a most disrespectful manner at the heels and ankles of the heir-apparent to the British throne!

"Call off your cur, you damned rascal!" cried the Prince, exasperated almost to madness, as he danced about to avoid the teeth of the annoying mongrel. "Do you hear me, sir?—call off your dog! By the living God——But perhaps you do not know who I am?"

"Some swell-mob scoundrel dressed up in masquerade toggery," said Mobbs, who at that moment was conveying Pauline Clarendon to a sofa—the disturbance having startled her from the deep swoon into which she had fallen.

But springing to her feet, the beauteous maiden threw a rapid glance around; and finding herself freed from the odious embraces of her royal tormentor, she paused not to reflect how she had been delivered nor even to thank her deliverer;—but, obedient to the impulse of the terrors consequent on the startling manner in which she had been awakened, she darted from the room.

"Stop her! stop her, I command you!" cried the Prince of Wales, no longer able to control either his words or his actions: and he rushed after the flying damsel.

"At him, Toby!" ejaculated Mobbs;—and in a moment the teeth of the dog were fixed in the heir-apparent's right leg.

And the heir-apparent,—Oh! crowning ignominy! roared most lustily, while Pauline Clarendon, snatching up her cloak on the landing, bounded along—descended the stairs half-a-dozen at a time—and, opening the front door, rushed from the house. For the hall was empty, the footman whom Mobbs had encountered there, having hastened into the other house to alarm Mrs. Brace with the intelligence that a rough-looking fellow with a mongrel dog had invaded the sanctity of that portion of the establishment which was devoted to "fashionable accommodation."

In the meantime Mobbs had called off his dog; and the Prince of Wales, throwing himself exhausted and bleeding upon a sofa, was about to overwhelm the ex-constable with the astounding revelation of his name and rank, when even through the turmoil of his enraged feelings flashed (like lightning through the stormiest clouds) the conviction that he would only be covering himself with ridicule and enhancing his humiliation to the extremest verge were he to inform that sordid-looking, coarse, and ungainly ruffian who he really was.

"Ah! it's all wery well to lie there kicking up that infernal row," said Mobbs, who, although he had seen the Prince of Wales more than once in his life, did not recognise him in the masquerading garb: "but you've nobody to thank for all this but yourself. What the devil! are the king's lieges to be raped and ravished by such disguised mahogany-jumpers as you, in spite of their cries and screams. I shouldn't be doing my dooty as a Bow Street runner——"

And then Mr. Mobbs suddenly stopped short: for the remembrance flashed to his mind that he was no longer in the service of the peace.

"Ah! you're an officer—are you?" said his Royal Highness, who, despite the bitter annoyance which he felt and the pain which his lacerated leg was causing him, nevertheless perceived the imperious necessity of extricating himself as promptly and also as quietly as he could from the present dilemma

'Well, I dare say you know what it is to let a gentleman escape out of a difficulty by means of a golden key; and as the girl has come to no harm, it would be useless for you to carry the matter any farther. There—take those ten guineas and be off. You've done me quite mischief enough already—or rather your dog has," added the Prince, with a suppressed moan, as he tied his handkerchief round the wounded limb.

"Well, sir, I'm sure I don't want to make things more uncomfortabler than they are at present," said Mobbs, picking up with ill-concealed satisfaction the gold pieces which his Royal Highness threw down upon a table. "But you must know that if gentlemen like you will get into scrapes, they stand the chance of bringing the law about their ears."

"I paid you to take your departure, and not to remain here lecturing me," said the Prince, with all the dignified hauteur that was natural to him. "But stay—one moment," he cried, a sudden idea striking him: "how came you to burst into this room?—or rather, how was it that you were in the house at all?"

"I'd better leave it to this good lady to explain to you, sir," remarked Mobbs, pointing towards Mrs. Brace, who at the moment hurried into the room, followed by Frederick Dray and the other footman.

"Hush!" said the Prince, placing his finger upon his lip to warn the milliner not to utter a word which might make known his rank to Mobbs: for he saw by the agitation and dismay which her entire appearance exhibited that it was more than probable she might blurt forth something calculated to betray his incognito.

"I will call again to-morrow night. In the meantime you've nothing to fear, ma'am," hastily whispered the ex-constable as he passed by the milliner;—and, calling his dog to follow him, he took his departure, well pleased with the result of the adventure and chinking the gold in his pocket.

"You may retire," said the milliner to Frederick Dray and the other footman: then, the moment they had left the room, she turned towards the Prince, exclaiming, "My God! what has happened? But it was not my fault—you cannot blame me——Oh! I am going mad—mad!"

And flinging herself upon a chair, she pressed her hands to her throbbing brows, as if she could thereby steady her reason which she felt to be rocking upon its throne.

"What in the devil's name is the matter with you?" demanded the Prince, who was glad to find a vent for his execrable ill-humour even though it were against a poor defenceless woman—and that woman the pander to his vile pleasures. "Did that Bow Street runner come to make inquiries concerning the Magyman your husband?—or how was it that such an ill-looking ruffian came to be in the house at this time of night?"

"Mr. Harley—your Royal Highness—this is cruel—ungenerous—unkind to a degree," sobbed the wretched milliner. "I—I—do not deserve—such—such—treatment at your hands;"—and then she burst into a flood of tears.

"Come, Fanny—this is stupid," said the Prince, somewhat mollified by her grief. "I spoke hastily—and unkindly, I will admit: but when one has been interrupted just at the moment of success with a lovely creature—then subjected to the brutal insults of a low ruffian—next bitten in the leg by an accursed dog that may be mad for anything I know to the contrary——"

"Bitten—by a dog!" screamed Mrs. Brace, starting to her feet and surveying the Prince with dismay. "Oh! is this possible?"

"Quite possible—inasmuch as it has happened," said the heir-apparent, pointing to the bandage on his leg. "But I will hasten home and get Dr. Somers to look to it at once. Relieve me from suspense, however, before I take my departure—and tell me how that man came to burst into the room: for surely the girl's screams could not have been heard in St. James's Square?"

"No—no," responded the milliner hastily. "The officer came on a little business of his own—to—to—in fine, to receive some money for the affair of Caroline Walters;—and being in the other house, he heard the shrieks——"

"Enough, enough," exclaimed the Prince. "I am satisfied now. He did not recognise me—and I gave him ten guineas to go away quietly. But I was fearful that if the girl's screams had been heard outside, a crowd might have collected. Your explanation has however put my mind at rest on that head. And now, my dear Fanny, forgive me for what I said just now—and don't think the worse of your old friend on account of a passing petulance on his part. Come—one kiss—and then I will take my departure."

But as the milliner raised her countenance towards the Prince, he perceived that it was haggard and had a ghastly look; and fixing his eyes more intently upon her, he saw that the traces of profound horror and bitter grief were upon every lineament, despite her endeavours to assume a composed aspect.

"What in the name of heaven is the matter with you?" inquired the Prince, somewhat alarmed, inasmuch as there were so many of his own little affairs mixed up with those of Mrs. Brace that he did not know how far her present cause of annoyance might affect himself. "Tell me, Fanny—what is the matter with you?" he repeated, more emphatically still.

"Nothing—nothing—I can assure you," she answered. "Only the events of the last few days—Rose Foster's affair—that of Caroline Walters—and now the alarm of this night,—all these have unstrung my nerves."

"Well, you must take courage and console yourself," said the Prince, not for an instant suspecting that anything more serious than the circumstances she had enumerated was preying upon her mind. "And now good night. I myself am infernally vexed at the issue of the adventure with Pauline Clarendon——"

"Pauline Clarendon!" ejaculated Mrs. Brace, forgetting for a moment all the causes of her own affliction in the amazement with which the Prince's words had filled her.

"Well—since I inadvertently let the name escape me," he observed, with a smile, "I shall not attempt to conceal the truth. Besides, I may require your assistance in the matter——"

"And that was Pauline Clarendon whom you brought hither just now?" remarked the milliner still under the influence of a profound and somewhat painful surprise. "What—is it possible that the amour with her unfortunate sister did not cause both you and me sufficient alarm——"

"My dear Fanny," interrupted the Prince, in a resolute tone, "it is useless to remonstrate! When I came in so hurried a manner to you just now and told you that I had seen the loveliest figure in the whole world at the masquerade and that Germain was about to bring the unknown hither, I declared that I was already maddened by the elegance, grace, and virgin freshness of that transcendent form. I was then utterly ignorant who the Flower Girl could be: but when she revealed her countenance in this room—Oh! then never did Pauline appear so ravishingly beautiful! A thousand charms on no former occasion observed by me, were instantaneously discovered—and she struck me as being more lovely than Octavia. Think you, then, that I will abandon the hope of this conquest?—think you that I will renounce my pursuit of her? No—no—a hundred thousand times no! And it was also because she was haughty and reproachful—because she looked daggers at me with her magnificent eyes—and because she darted forth galling arrows in the shape of words from between the parting roses of her lips,—aye, it is also on this account that I will wage war against her stubborn virtue, so that my vengeance and my bliss shall be crowned with triumph at the same moment! Seek not therefore to turn me from my purpose: but on the contrary, prepare to lend me your aid when I may require it. And now once more good night."

Thus speaking, the Prince quitted the room; and muffling himself up in an ample cloak, he returned on foot to Carlton House.

CHAPTER CXLVII

THE BOUDOIR OF LOVE AND MYSTERY.

We must now return to Lord Montgomery and the Circassian Slave whom we left at the moment when the latter introduced the former into a chamber the atmosphere of which was warm and perfumed.

Quitting her hold upon the nobleman's hand, his fair companion locked the door; and he heard her take out the key, which she deposited somewhere in the room. She then bade him remove the handkerchief from around his head and throw off his mask and domino; and when he had done this, he found, as of course he had expected, that the chamber was involved in the most pitchy darkness.

That this was the same room of which Lord Florimel had spoken, Montgomery felt convinced the instant that he set foot in it: for the approaches to it were precisely the same, as detailed in italic at the close of the hundred and forty-sixth chapter; and he speedily found that not only was it furnished in a most luxurious manner, but that certain articles of furniture were precisely the same as his noble friend had represented. That is to say, *the table stood between the sofa and the bed; and near the head of the bed there was a large arm-chair.*

"Seat yourself by my side, dear Eugene," said the lady, in the most tender cadence of her melting and musical voice, taking his hand at the same time and thus bringing him close to her upon the sofa: then throwing her arms about his neck, she drew him towards her and their lips met again in a long, burning kiss.

"Dearest, dearest lady," exclaimed the nobleman, a flood of rapture pouring in unto his soul; "what earthly happiness can compare with this?"

And then, as one arm clasped her supple, yielding, and luxurious form, he passed his right hand caressingly over her countenance, and he could tell by the touch that her features were beautifully formed, while her cheeks were of velvet softness in one sense and plump and firm in another. Her breath was as fragrant as the zephyr which passes over the sweetest flowers; and he had already observed beneath her mask, when in the theatre, that her teeth were white as pearls and faultlessly even.

"Now tell me candidly, my dear Eugene," she observed as her head reposed upon his shoulder,—"tell me what you think of the woman who could so far forget herself as to become the heroine of such an adventure as this whereof you yourself are the hero."

"I was about to reply, my charming friend," said Montgomery, "that the intoxication of the happiness which I experience leaves no leisure for reflection, and indeed that I have no wish to think of anything save the ineffable delight which I enjoy in your society. But your question has forced the subject upon my thoughts; and I will candidly declare that I consider you to be wise in following the dictates of your feelings and the impulse of your tenderest passions in strewing the rugged paths of this world with as many flowers as possible. You are formed for love and pleasure:—Oh! yes—your nature and your person are alike glowing with raptures, to experience and to impart them! And I love you—I swear by everything sacred that I love you—and perhaps all the more fervently, all the more madly, because of this mystery with which you envelop yourself and which constitutes an additional charm."

"You love me—you love me," murmured the impassioned woman, yielding herself unresistingly to the caresses which the nobleman lavished upon her and courting the voluptuous toyings in which he indulged; "but of what nature is this love, Eugene? Oh! do not deceive me—but confess that it is the mere excitement of the imagination and the passions—an excitement that will leave no durable sentiment behind!"

"On the contrary, my dearest unknown," exclaimed Montgomery, speaking with fervour and straining her passionately in his embrace,—"I shall never, never forget these moments of love so ineffably delicious and so truly elysian! Ah! if there were a light in this chamber, you could tell by my eyes—by my whole countenance—that I am speaking the truth: but even in the midst of this darkness may'st thou obtain a proof the strength of those emotions which I feel! There—place you hand upon my heart—does it not palpitate with the flutterings of a tenderness which is not altogether sensual? And even now, with the full enjoyment of bliss within my reach, do I prefer reclining with you for a time in this manner—my arm round your waist—your head upon my shoulder—your breath fanning my cheek—your bosom heaving against my chest—and your voice flowing in the sweetest melody upon my ears. Yes—there is sentiment in all this;—and where there is sentiment, something more permanent than a mere gross passion hath assuredly an existence. Again, it would be pouring gall into the cup of ambrosia of which I am now drinking such deep draughts, were you to tell me that this is the last time as well as the first that I am ever to enjoy so much happiness. I shall know not a greater joy than that of meeting you

again: I could know not a greater misery than that of being separated from you for ever. Now, then, adored lady—tell me whether you think I love you?"

"Yes—I believe that you experience an interest in me, Eugene," said the unknown, interrupting herself at every word to bestow upon him the tenderest kisses; "and I at once promise you that we shall meet again."

"Thanks—ten thousand thanks, sweet lady, for this assurance," cried the Earl, in unfeigned rapture. "But you will not allow too long an interval to elapse——"

"No," was the soft response: "for I myself shall be only too happy to renew the pleasures of this meeting."

"Then you love me, dear lady—you love me?" exclaimed Montgomery, in a tone evincing the anxiety with which he awaited her answer.

"Yes—I love you, Eugene," said the mysterious unknown; "for I now find that you are as amiable and agreeable as you are grandly handsome. And at some future meeting," she continued, in a still lower and softer tone, as if her entire being were melting under the influence of her emotions,—"at some future meeting it may be that I shall throw aside the mask of mystery and tell you who I am."

"Beloved friend," said the nobleman, "I care not who you may be, inasmuch as I adore you for yourself only—and whether you are a Duchess or a humble gentlewoman, my sentiments must ever remain the same. But there *does* exist a reason wherefore I should rejoice in the dissolution of the mystery which at present surrounds you—and that is because I should then behold with my eyes that countenance which I can only now contemplate with my imagination. On this account shall I hail with an indescribable ecstacy the moment when you may choose to place a full and complete confidence in me."

"And the arrival of that moment depends altogether upon yourself, Eugene," said the lady, one of her fair hands playing caressingly with his countenance.

"Upon myself!" he repeated. "Oh! explain the meaning of your words, my well-beloved—and teach me how I can merit your confidence."

"Listen to me, Eugene—and I will be candid with you," said the lady, in a tone of tender gravity. "The ardour of my temperament induces me to seek the pleasures of love in the manner which brought Lord Florimel to my arms, and which has this night thrown you and me together. I am unmarried—immensely rich—and entirely my own mistress. But you will ask wherefore I have not sought in marriage the legitimate gratification of my passions? In explanation I must inform you that I have ever held in abhorrence the idea of being chained to one individual; and moreover, knowing the frailty of my nature, I should have shrunk from the bare thought of becoming the wife of an honourable and perhaps kind-hearted and confiding man, to whom it would have been impossible for me to remain constant. Under all these circumstances I preferred the adoption of that luxurious, free, and unshackled existence which was led by the celebrated Manon Lescaut of France—with this difference, however, that whereas she threw neither veil nor gloss over her amours, I have hitherto concealed mine beneath that impenetrable mystery which hides my name, rank, and even personal identity at this very moment from yourself. Well, for some years have I led this life: and yet my lovers have been comparatively few—and those all selected according to the passing whim of a moment. Now, however, I begin to grow weary of that existence; and I experience the necessity of having some one whom I may love and by whom I shall be beloved. I do not think of marriage—no, not a whit more now than I did when first abandoning myself to this career of what may be termed mysterious voluptuousness. But I long to find a man who is handsome, elegant, and agreeable, and who possesses those honourable and delicate feelings that will render him silent as the tomb in respect to the real position in which he stands towards me. For the world believes me pure and virtuous—my name is untarnished—and my reputation is spotless as the mirror. To preserve this fair fame is naturally my object;—and therefore the man who secretly becomes my lover, must be one deserving the confidence reposed in him. For my *honour*—and in that word are also comprised my happiness and my very life—would be in his keeping; and before I can bring my mind to put so immense a trust in any human being, I must receive ample proofs of his worthiness. And here I will observe that so extraordinary are the precautions which I adopt to conceal my frailty from every eye, that not even the domestics who attended the carriage which brought you hither just now, suspect for a moment the real purpose of your coming. I shall not reveal to you the tale which I invent on such occasions and which they implicitly believe: suffice it to say that it is so feasible as to be convincing to them — and not a suspicion exists in their mind as to the purity of their mistress. Thus, my dear Eugene, you perceive that hitherto my amours have been conducted with a security and a safety which leave my reputation untainted; and I shall not lightly nor hastily break down a single one of all the defences and precautions with which I have surrounded my proceedings."

"And if I were to convince you, beloved lady," said Montgomery, who had listened in a strange kind of bewilderment to the singular avowals and explanations which were wafted to his ear in a voice of such melting softness,—"if I were to convince you that I am worthy of your confidence—that I possess those feelings of honour and delicacy which you described——"

"In that case, my handsome Eugene," exclaimed the unknown, in a voice that trembled with ecstatic emotions, while her whole frame vibrated beneath the same influence as she lay embraced in his arms,—"in that case, my handsome Eugene, you would only have to demand the revelation of my name and rank and to desire that the light of day should shine upon my countenance in your presence—and you would be gratified. For I may say with truth that I bear a proud name—and without vanity that I am beautiful!"

"But of what nature is the proof you require with regard to myself, dear lady?" asked Montgomery, his curiosity excited to an almost intolerable pitch.

"On that head, Eugene, I will give you some explanation," was the reply. "Know, then, that the man who would seek my confidence must begin by giving me his own; and to learn my secrets he must entrust me with all those which he cherishes in his own breast. He must unbosom himself entirely to me, even to the revelation of any little acts or deeds in his life on which he may look back with regret or

shame. And if his earlier years have been sullied by any crime, so much the better for the purpose we are now discussing."

"I do not comprehend you, mysterious being that you are!" exclaimed Lord Montgomery, a slight shudder passing through his frame.

"Oh! I will soon render myself intelligible, Eugene," she replied, mingling her words with caresses—as if she felt that he trembled and was anxious to reassure him. "For can you not understand that the individual who places himself as it were in my power, instantaneously and by virtue of that fact renders himself worthy to become the depositor of my secret? And therefore do I say that if he have committed some crime, it is all the better for such a purpose, inasmuch as if he confide his honour, his liberty, or his life to my keeping, I could not for a moment hesitate to entrust my reputation in his hands. A mutual necessity binds us to secrecy; and we have a reciprocal interest in shielding each other. For if the man whom I thus select as my lover has at any period of his life committed a deed which he would blush to avow or tremble to have made public,—be it swindling, rape, robbery, forgery, or even murder,—I should be all the more ready to trust him, and all the more confident in the safety of my secret. Nor should I love him the less: on the contrary, it would give me pleasure to sooth his wounded spirit—and even his remorse would recommend him the more closely to my affections, because I should rejoice in the fact that he was thus dependent upon me for solace and sympathy. If he were poor, or a spendthrift, I should likewise love him with the greater ardour, because I should feel that he was more completely *mine*, inasmuch as by placing the riches of my purse at his disposal I should ensure his gratitude and touch all the tenderest feelings of his nature. Now, therefore, my dear Eugene, you perceive that I am prepared to accept as a paramour a man whose name must be honourable, though his private life be sullied,—a man

who, like myself, can look the world in the face but who dares not take a survey of his own soul. In a word, such a man must first place himself entirely in my power, before I will consent to place myself in his; and he who will do this to prove his devotion, not only gains my love for evermore, but may likewise enjoy the use of those superfluous thousands which I now bestow upon thankless relatives or equivocal public institutions."

"I have dwelt with an interest the most profound, dear lady, upon every word which has fallen from your lips," said the nobleman, bewildered by her language and intoxicated by the fond ardour of her caresses; "and I now comprehend you fully. But suppose that I was to tell you, while becoming a candidate for your permanent love, that I have never committed a deed the revelation of which would place me in your power, and that I am therefore unable to give you the guarantees which you require."

"Were you to tell me this much, Eugene," replied the lady, in a tone of prompt decision, "I should not believe you—and indeed you would at once destroy all the confidence which I might be previously disposed to place in you. Because there breathes not a man who has devoted himself to pleasure and who is known to be extravagant and even profligate,—there breathes not such a man who can hold his head erect and proclaim himself sinless. No—it is impossible! And, moreover, were you to dare use such an assertion in my case, it would take the aspect of an insult: for as much as it would be contemplating your own vaunted virtue with my frailty and shame."

"Dearest lady, I do not pretend to be immaculate," said the Earl, lowering his voice to a whisper: "nay, more—I will even confess——"

"Ah! now you inspire me with an increasing confidence, Eugene—my handsome Eugene!" exclaimed the impassioned unknown; and fastening her lips to his mouth, she bestowed upon him so long, luxurious, and burning a kiss that his form quivered with a perfect frenzy of ecstatic sensations, and he experienced all the delicious ebriety of the soul's thrilling raptures. Yes, now I begin to adore you, my Eugene," continued the Circassian Slave, her bosom heaving and falling with voluptuous tumult against his chest: "and I will make you the god of my worship—the idol of my devotion, if you have only the courage to gain my confidence. Oh! I already feel that we are destined to arrive at a full and complete understanding with each other;—and I now rejoice at the deception which you practised in order to take the place of your friend Florimel. For you, my Eugene, can appreciate the love and tenderness which I am prepared to bestow upon you, and which will place all I possess at your disposal! Yes—there is no sacrifice that I will not make for you, Eugene, in order to prove the strength—the ardour—the permanence of my attachment; and in return you will ever be as kind and amiable as you are now."

"Oh! every word you utter constitutes an irresistible temptation, syren that thou art!" murmured the nobleman, now intoxicated with passion and maddened with desire to a degree which rendered him reckless of everything in the whole world save the charming object of his present enthusiasm. "Never did I become so completely a prey to the witching influence of woman as I now am—never was I so utterly enthralled by the magic of her voice, the tender persuasiveness of her tongue, and the ardour of her caresses. Oh! to behold your countenance—to look into the depth of those eyes which must be so beautiful—to gaze upon the expressive softness of those features which are faultless even to the touch as I pass my hand over them—to behold the flush of love and pleasure upon your cheeks—and to *see* that bosom's heaving which I now *feel*,—Oh! what sacrifice would I not make—what price would I not pay? Yes; even if it were placing my more than honour—my very existence—in your power, I should not hesitate!"

"Then you do love me, Eugene—you love me, although you have not seen my face?" exclaimed the Circassian Slave, throwing fresh fervour if possible into her caresses and a more thrilling tenderness into her voice. "But I have already told you that I *am* beautiful—and it will be a proud moment for me when I can reveal my countenance to your eyes! Oh! *then*, I shall not fear the result of the impression which will be made upon you; on the contrary, I have vanity enough to believe that you will bless the day that gave such a mistress to your arms. Moreover,—and you will excuse me for again touching upon such a subject at such a moment,—I know that your resources have been well nigh absorbed by your love of pleasure and a ruinous law-suit; and it will be my joy and delight to bring back smiles to your lips by placing some fifteen or twenty thousand pounds in your hands. Yes, I have that sum at my disposal at the present time; and it is yours, Eugene—yours, as a small token of my love—as a proof of my confidence—as an earnest of that compact of affection and of secret understanding which must henceforth bind us to each other. And think not, my handsome Eugene, that I shall prove a jealous mistress, or that any ridiculous whims or despotic exactions on my part will instill the least drop of gall into the cup of pleasure which we are to quaff with each other. No; my whole study shall be to ensure your happiness; and if you choose to make some deserving woman the partner of your rank and fortune, I shall not regard her as a rival. Because I shall rest assured that you will still find a few occasional leisure moments to devote to one who has already conceived a sudden but not the less powerful affection for you, and who is disposed to make every sacrifice to ensure your felicity and retain your friendship until death."

There was something indescribably winning in the caresses that accompanied this persuasive appeal which went searchingly to the innermost depths of the nobleman's heart; and there was likewise something so mysteriously romantic and yet so full of truth and sincerity in the language and the manner in which the impassioned woman offered her love and her riches for the acceptance of that man whose ardent temperament made him rejoice at the possession of the former and whose almost beggared purse caused him to snatch greedily at the latter,—there was something so strange, so full of a magic charm, so profoundly touching in all this, that the strongest mind would have yielded and the most suspicious nature would have given way. The reader will not therefore be surprised if Lord Montgomery surrendered himself, soul and body, to the ineffable witchery of that mysterious influence,—and anxious to behold the realisation of all that the enamoured lady had shadowed forth in language alike so tender and so glowing, he folded *her* in an

embrace full of enthusiastic feeling, exclaiming, "Oh! my adored unknown, let me at once prove myself worthy of your confidence! let the delicious compact be sealed between us without another moment's delay!"

"Tell me, then, my handsome Eugene, all that concerns you," said the Circassian Slave, overwhelming him with the tenderest kisses and the most voluptuous toyings: "tell me the history of your life—unbosom every secret which your soul cherishes! Retrace your whole career—tremble not to expose its faults—shrink not from unveilling its deeper stains, if such there be. But act frankly and candidly towards me—make me your confidant and your friend—and all mystery shall then at once cease on my part!"

"Yes; I will place myself in your power, dearest lady—irresistible charmer!" said the Earl, in a stifling tone. "Oh! if you were Satan in disguise, luring me to destruction, I could not combat against the influence which you have acquired over me. My God! how I long to know who you are, woman of wondrous witchery and romantic mysteriousness that thou still art to me! But since it now depends upon myself to dissolve that spell which renders you thus unknown and your countenance invisible, I will not delay the talismanic conjuration which is to lighten this strange darkness. Give me thine ear, then, my well-beloved—and prepare to listen to things, some of which will excite thy liveliest interest, and others make the blood curdle in thy veins!"

"Oh! tell me all that, my adored Eugene—my worshipped lover!" murmured the lady, pressing his hand passionately against her glowing bosom. "And think not that you will alarm or annoy me by any possible revelation which you can make; for I warn you that unless the promised confidence be so complete and in itself contain such facts as will place you thoroughly in my power, I shall not dare incur the risk of making myself known to you."

"God knows, thou syren," exclaimed Lord Montgomery, a rapid shudder passing over him—a shudder which she felt as she reclined in his arms, and which made her press even more closely still to his breast,—"God knows, thou syren, that I am about to place myself in thy power!"

And then, as if to escape from the thoughts which had for an instant disturbed him with so harrowing an effect, and fall back again into that ecstacy of feeling which bathed his whole soul in a fount of voluptuousness, he imprinted innumerable kisses on the smooth brow, the glowing cheeks, and the moist plump mouth of his companion;—and then yielding to the torrent of emotions which, alike delirious and delicious in their intoxicating influence, bore him on as if in an irresistible whirl of pleasure, he began to breathe his promised confessions in the ear of the lady!

And then, in the deep Stygian darkness of that chamber, but in an atmosphere warm and perfumed, with a splendid creature reclining in his arms, her whole form respiring soft and sensuous love,—in this manner did the nobleman, no longer master of himself, but hurried on by a witching influence which he could not control—rendered insensate to, and indifferent to all consequences save those which the syren herself had shadowed forth,—abandoning himself therefore to the spell which was upon him, and full of a fervent hope and a blind confidence,—in this manner was it, we say, that Lord Montgomery began to pour forth his revelations into the ears of the woman who had acquired so marvellous an ascendancy over him.

And she listened to the tale in the deepest silence, remaining almost motionless, too, in his arms the whole time, as if wrapped up in a breathless attention—save that now and then she pressed his hand with all the apparent ardour of the enthusiasm she had previously testified towards him; but when he paused, after having spoken for nearly a quarter of an hour in a low and murmuring though perfectly audible voice, she threw her arms around his neck,—kissed him passionately—and exclaimed in a voice full of joyous excitement, "Oh! I thank thee for this confidence, my ever dear, dear Eugene!"

"And you are not ashamed of the man who is henceforth to be thy lover—thy paramour—thy fiend?" said the Earl, his whole frame trembling with the ecstatic feelings which her ardour caused him to experience.

"Ashamed of you!" she repeated. "Oh! no—no—that were impossible! On the contrary, I adore you—I worship you, my handsome Eugene! For now I perceive that all the licentiousness—all the voluptuous profligacy of my own career, render me a fitting companion for thee. Ashamed of you!—Ah! should I not be also ashamed of myself, if I experienced such a feeling with regard to thee?"

"And yet you have heard all the cruelties I have practised towards the unhappy girls whom I have seduced at different times," said the nobleman; "how I have deserted them—suffered them to pine away in neglect or perish in poverty."

"Every man of pleasure has done the same," observed the lady.

"Then, too," he continued, "you have heard all the meannesses which I have practised at different times to raise money—aye, and the crimes, too that I have committed—such as fraud upon my bankers, forgery with my discounters, and all the routine of those acts which men so frequently practise when driven to desperation by their pecuniary necessities."

"Yes; but you have passed through the ordeal without detection," said the Circassian Slave; "and in the presence of the world your name is as untarnished and your reputation as unsullied as ever it was. Oh! all that you have told me yet amounts to comparatively nothing when we thus examine it in details, and I still feel that my lascivious life stamps me with greater infamy than that which, so far as I am yet aware, could possibly attach itself to you. Proceed, therefore, my generous Eugene—my noble-hearted lover—and do not let me have to blush in your presence when I reveal my countenance. No—it is for you to prove yourself worse than I—and then away with the mystery that now surrounds me!"

"Well—I will proceed, my angel—I will tell you more——"

"Not *more*—but *all*!" interrupted the lady, with passionate vehemence. "Come, delay not; time is passing——"

"Oh! your anxiety to reach the end of this phase in our connexion is not greater than mine,

dearest unknown," exclaimed the Earl. "I will therefore at once resume my confession by touching upon that law-suit in which I am engaged against the Marchioness of Bellenden. Do you know that lady?"

"I have seen her; but we are not acquainted," was the response; and the Circassian Slave pressed the nobleman's hand, as if to encourage him to proceed.

And he *did* proceed; and, in thus continuing his narrative he spoke in a lower, deeper, and more solemn tone—as if his *words* were now *things*, and his language was conveying matters of the gravest import. And again in utter silence and with a respiration almost entirely suspended, did the lady listen to the revealings which grew more astounding—more awe-inspiring as they progressed;—until at last the nobleman breathed *one* fact—gave utterance to *one* circumstance which made her whole frame vibrate with a sudden tremor as she lay reclining in his arms. 'Twas as if a galvanic shock had been imparted all in a moment and unexpectedly;—and the Earl stopped short beneath the influence of a consternation which fell upon him with a similar abruptness.

"Ah! *now* you loathe—you abhor—you detest me," he exclaimed in a wild tone; "and I have said *too much!*"

"No, no, dearest Eugene—not a syllable too much!" hastily cried the Circassian Slave, starting up and for the tenth time throwing her arms about his neck and folding him in a fervid embrace. "I rejoice—Oh! I rejoice that you have done *that deed*—at least for one reason: because now I can look you without shame in the face, and moreover you have indeed placed yourself in my power. But such a noble confidence shall never, never be betrayed by me: on the contrary, I will cherish your secret as religiously as if it were mine own. And now you must give me all the details of that event, my Eugene—for it is invested with a thrilling and exciting interest!"

And the insensate nobleman, once again abandoning himself to that ecstacy of feeling in which the wiles, the witchery, and the fascination of this extraordinary woman appeared to be able to plunge him at will—continued to breathe in her ear the explanatory details which she sought, and to the narration of which she encouraged him by the tenderest caresses.

At length he ceased speaking—and every incident of his life was now made known to her!

"You have told me all, Eugene—you have told me all," she murmured, as seated upon his knees, with her arms round his neck, she lavished upon him such kisses that the very air of that dark chamber seemed filled with their fervour: "you have told me all, and I thank you—Oh! I thank you from the bottom of my soul. But now let us seek the couch of love—and when the morning dawns, the sunbeams shall shine upon my countenance! Then will I reveal to you my name—and all the first conditions of our compact will be fulfilled!"

"Be it as you say, adorable woman!" exclaimed the Earl, maddened with desire; and he covered her face with devouring kisses.

"Stay—we must seal our compact with wine as well as with love," said the lady, as if inspired with the sudden thought of enhancing the thrill of sensual longing by the influence of the generous grape: and reaching towards the table but without quitting her position upon his knees, she felt with her fair hands for what she sought.

In a few moments the sharp sound of an exploding cork, followed by the hissing of effervescent wine, and by the exhalation of a delicious aroma, made Lord Montgomery aware that it was in champagne the compact was to be ratified;—and immediately afterwards he felt a glass raised to his lips.

"I pledge thee, my Eugene," said the lady, "in the generous juice of Epernay, and long may the bond of our affection endure."

"I pledge thee in return, my adorable unknown," exclaimed Montgomery; "and may death alone be enabled to quench the flame of that passion which we now cherish for each other!"

Having thus spoken, he drained the glass; but as he withdrew it from his lips, it fell from his hands—and a mortal terror suddenly seized upon him as he experienced a sensation of giddiness fasten on his brain as it were all in an instant. A cry of alarm escaped him—and the lady sprang from her seat upon his knees, her musical tones now sounding in a laugh of triumph. He endeavoured to raise himself from the sofa: but his limbs were heavy as lead—insensibility gained upon him—all his ideas fell suddenly into confusion—he heard nothing more—he felt nothing more—and the scene of mystery, and love, and romance terminated all in a moment in an utter blank!

* * * * * * *

When Lord Montgomery awoke again to consciousness, the light was streaming in upon him from the window facing the couch in which he was lying. He rubbed his eyes and looked around. Where was he? Why assuredly in his own chamber in Grafton Street—in his own bed!

Then was it all a dream? were all those circumstances which now came slowly back to his memory, mere incidents of a fantastic vision? and had he been the prey of a delusion in which the Circassian Slave was a heroine supplied by his own over-heated imagination?

Yes; it must be so! And yet, as he raised himself up in his bed and looked all about the apartment with the bewilderment of one who knows not yet whether he be really awake or still dreaming, his eyes caught the sight of the *blue domino* upon the chair by the side of the couch.

Unable to endure the agonising suspense which now seized upon him, he rang the bell violently.

The summons was almost immediately answered by his valet.

"Gilbert, what time was it when I came home last night?" demanded the nobleman, assuming a tone of indifference: for he did not choose his dependent to observe the excitement of feeling under which he was labouring.

"It was about two o'clock this morning, my lord," was the response.

"Ah!" was the Earl's involuntary ejaculation: for the conviction struck him, with the withering effect of lightning, that the adventures of the past night were indeed no dream. "Well—was I in rather a curious state?—or how was it?" he demanded impatiently.

"Since your lordship asks the question," said Gilbert, "I am bound to reply. The truth, then, is that your lordship was so exceedingly overcome by liquor as to be entirely insensible."

"And who was kind enough to bring me home?" inquired the nobleman, his heart sinking lower and lower every instant.

"Your lordship arrived in a carriage——"

"Whose carriage?" was the demand uttered with almost savage impatience.

"I do not know, my lord," returned Gilbert. "It was a plain one of dark colour——"

"Ah!" again ejaculated Montgomery, remembering a certain point in Florimel's narrative where *the* barouche was similarly described. "But go on. Who came with me?"

"A footman had charge of your lordship——"

"A tall man—a very tall man?" exclaimed the Earl, the fever of his impatience amounting almost to a frenzy.

"I believe he was, my lord," responded the valet: "but really I took little notice of him—unless it was to observe that he studiously averted his countenance from the light of the street-lamp, as he helped to lift your lordship out of the carriage."

"But did he say nothing?" demanded Montgomery.

"Merely that your lordship had indulged somewhat too freely where you had passed the evening," replied the valet. "The carriage immediately drove away, and I put your lordship to bed."

"You may retire," said the nobleman.

Gilbert accordingly withdrew; and the instant the door closed behind him, the unhappy Earl gave vent to his tortured feelings in a moan of indescribable anguish—and, burying his head in the pillows, he yielded to all the excruciating agonies of his terrible reflections.

For he now remembered that he had placed not only his honour, but his very life, in the hands of a woman totally unknown to him; and the termination of his interview with her was by no means of a reassuring nature. Indeed, it was impossible to blind himself to the damning fact that, with the most exquisite skill and a marvellous refinement of astuteness, she had succeeded in wheedling him out of secrets which might be used against him with an effect that he shuddered to contemplate.

Recoiling in horror from this stage of his agonising reflections, he cursed—Oh! how bitterly, bitterly he cursed his folly—his worse than folly—his madness—raving, stark, staring, incomprehensible madness—in divulging such tremendous secrets to an utter stranger. But the evil was done: it was irrevocable as are all deeds which belong to the past;—and like too many of those incidents in the life of man, it left behind bitter food for reflection.

CHAPTER CXLVIII.

THE PIOUS TRAVELLERS.

THE morning which followed the night of the masquerade and all the incidents resulting therefrom, was clear, bright, and beautiful.

At about half-past nine o'clock on this said agreeable morning, two individuals might have been observed riding quietly along the road running through Blackheath. One was mounted upon an animal which its proprietor no doubt called a horse: but it was the most wretched specimen of skin and bones that was ever compelled to perform active service instead of being immolated at a knackers' yard for the benefit of sausage-makers and purveyors of cats'-meat. The other individual was seated upon the back—or rather the hind-quarters of one of those useful quadrupeds called donkeys; and instead of keeping by the side of his companion, he rode respectfully behind him.

But who are these travellers that must even at the first glance remind our readers so strongly of Don Quixote and Sancho Panza? who are these wayfarers, mounted upon beasts that certainly might have a more comely appearance?

The one sitting so demurely on the back of the wretched Rozinante, is none other than our dearly-beloved friend the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby,—and the humble individual bestriding the noble ass, is his faithful follower, Mr. Ichabod Paxwax.

And if they were any other than two such highly respectable and soul-saving "vessels" we should be disposed to laugh heartily at the ridiculous figure which they both cut on the present occasion; but being the leaders of the New Lights, we must contemplate their progress with awe and record their adventures with as much gravity as we can command for the purpose. At the same time, we are bound to admit that there *was* considerable extenuation on behalf of the small boys who roared, and yelled, and hooted as the reverend travellers passed by the spots where they were playing: for Mr. Sneaksby had evidently put on his most pathetic air of sanctimonious misery and had screwed up his countenance to the extremest pitch of pious wretchedness—while Mr. Paxwax look uncommonly like a man who, having been awfully drunk over-night, labours under the effect of an excruciating headache next morning, and wears an aspect as doleful as if he were just going to be hanged.

Slowly did the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby and Ichabod Paxwax journey along,—the horse on which the former was mounted, maintaining a shuffling shambling pace, as if it were as pious as its rider and had a violent inclination to fall upon its knees—and the donkey jogging onward in a sullen, obstinate, dogged manner as if he had made up his mind that no earthly power should be able to impel him into an accelerated speed.

"Five miles have we ridden, Brother Paxwax," said Mr. Sneaksby, at length breaking a long silence and glancing at a mile-stone as he spoke; "and verily it hath taken us two hours to achieve this much of our journey."

"Two mortal hours, Brother Sneaksby," answered Ichabod; "and, behold! my nether parts are already sorely inflamed by the unpleasant motion of this obstinate beast."

"Of a surety, when I behold the trouble which thine animal causeth thee, Brother Paxwax," said Mr. Sneaksby, "I no longer marvel that Balaam should have been angered by his ass."

"And if Balaam had possessed a horse, he assuredly would not have ridden the ass," rejoined Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, somewhat savagely.

"My dear brother, thou art impatient," said the Rev. Mr. Sneaksby, in a tone of gentle remonstrance.

"Why, when one is pretty well raw exactly where it is most inconvenient to be so," observed Ichabod, with continued acrimony in his tone, "it is enough to make him somewhat ruffled in his temper."

"Thou art deficient in grace, Brother Paxwax," said his leader, reproachfully.

"Verily, and it is rather a supply of grease which I need at this moment, Brother Sneaksby," retorted Ichabod.

"Dost thou turn my words to ridicule?" exclaimed the reverend gentleman, now speaking sharply himself. "Truly, and this is most disrespectful on thy part, Brother Paxwax: it is likewise unjust and unkind, seeing that I am in no way an accessory to the galling which thou receivest in the breech from the uncouth trotting of that animal. For when it was resolved by the Elders last evening that a deputation should repair to Dartford, and when you and I were requested to undertake that grave and solemn duty, thou didst of thine own accord declare thine intention of riding upon an ass as a proof of thy meekness and a sign of thy humility."

"Since we are alone together, Brother Sneaksby," observed Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, who was writhing miserably upon the saddle, and making the most awful contortions with his full-moon countenance,—"I will honestly and frankly confess that I chose this asinine mode of conveyance inasmuch as I am unaccustomed to bestride the nobler animal called a horse."

"And therefore, you perceive, Brother Paxwax, that thy duplicity is deservedly punished," said Mr. Sneaksby. "Thou didst arrogate to thyself meekness and humility in selecting the ass—and the hidden reason was thine incapacity to ride the horse. Dost thou know, Brother Paxwax, what the ungodly would call thee?"

"What?" demanded Ichabod.

"A humbug," replied his reverend leader.

"Then if the ungodly did," exclaimed Mr. Paxwax; "I would pull off my coat—tuck up my shirt sleeves—and punch the ungodly's head."

"Oh! thou man of wrath!" ejaculated Mr. Sneaksby, dropping the reins and holding up his hands in sanctimonious horror at the warlike threat.

But as the travellers were at this moment descending a hill and the horse more than ever required to have his head held up, on account of his kneeling propensities, the result of Mr. Sneaksby's sudden abandonment of the reins was that the beast stumbled over a stone—and the reverend leader of the New Lights was pitched airily and neatly over the animal's head.

"Murder!" roared the reverend gentleman, as he rolled over and over upon the dusty road.

"Fire!" ejaculated Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, not knowing in the bewilderment of the moment what was the precise nature of the alarm which he ought to raise.

"Of a verity this is marvellously unpleasant," groaned forth Mr. Sneaksby, slowly and painfully rising from the ground and rubbing himself all over. "I am sorely bruised: but I thank God that no bones are broken. But now I cannot remount this graceless beast without assistance; and, in all Christian charity, Brother Paxwax, art thou bound to give me a leg up."

"Be it as thou sayest," exclaimed Mr. Paxwax, descending with a sort of gingerly precaution from his donkey: for the poor man was indeed enduring excruciating pain from the cause already hinted at.

Having just rubbed off the dust from his reverend leader's garments by means of his pocket-handkerchief, Mr. Paxwax endeavoured to hoist that reverend gentleman upon the horse: but just at the moment when the said reverend gentleman was about to throw his leg over, the animal started suddenly aside—and the result was that Mr. Sneaksby fell heavily a second time, bearing down Mr. Paxwax with him.

Up they both got in woful plight; and it really may be pardoned them if they both gave vent to those little ejaculatory expressions of irritation which are vulgarly called oaths. Indeed, we are bound, as honest historians, to admit that the Reverend Nathaniel Sneaksby damned the horse's eyes—while Mr. Ichabod Paxwax proclaimed an ardent desire to cut his cursed liver out. Their very venial impatience being thus expended in imprecations, they regarded each other with looks of shame and confusion.

"Brother Paxwax didst thou hear the words that fell from my lips?" said Mr. Sneaksby, in a humiliated and contrite tone.

"No—that I didn't!" exclaimed Ichabod. "Neither did you hear what I said, Brother Sneaksby."

"Verily and my ears were closed," was the response.

Mutually cheered by these assurances, they brushed the dust off each other's garments; and having performed this "Christian office," as they termed it, they made another attempt in respect to the "leg up." But this time Mr. Paxwax hoisted his reverend and venerated friend so suddenly up that the said reverend and venerated friend pitched completely over the animal, and rolled in the dust on the other side.

"Damnation seize you for a clumsy fool!" roared Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby, now irritated beyond all power of endurance; and starting up from the ground, he rushed after Mr. Ichabod Paxwax with the evident intention of inflicting personal chastisement upon him.

But Ichabod, despite of the menace which he had just now uttered relative to punching the head of the ungodly, was at the bottom an arrant coward; and darting away, he led Mr. Sneaksby a race—now running round the horse and the ass—then dodging in between them—until his reverend pursuer was quite exhausted.

"Brother Paxwax," said this gentleman, panting for breath, "let there be no strife between us—but give me the hand of peace."

"Cheerfully will I respond unto thy Christian proposal, Brother Sneaksby," exclaimed Ichabod: and he advanced in full confidence and with extended hand towards his leader.

"There! take that for your pains," ejaculated Mr. Sneaksby, dealing Mr. Paxwax a tremendous blow on the left eye the moment he got him within arm's reach.

This treacherous proceeding astounded Brother Ichabod even more completely than the assault staggered him; and clapping his hand to the damaged optic, he gazed with the other in a sort of stupid consternation upon his bellicose leader.

"Now who is the man of wrath?" he at length exclaimed—but prudently stepping back a pace or two in order to avoid a repetition of the punishment.

"I love thee, Brother Paxwax," said Mr. Sneaksby, whose anger was now appeased by the vent it had found: "yea, verily, I love thee—and therefore I chasten thee."

"Deuce take such love," growled Mr. Paxwax; "it has cost me no small measure of pain—besides the unpleasantness of appearing before the Reverend Joel Brugg with an eye bunged up."

"You shall bathe it in the limpid waters at the next spring we come to, Ichabod," said Mr. Sneaksby, now adopting a conciliatory tone—for in truth he was heartily ashamed of his intemperance.

"I would rather have a drop of strong water at the next public-house," quoth Mr. Paxwax.

"That likewise shalt thou have, Ichabod," rejoined the reverend gentleman.

Soothed by this promise, Mr. Paxwax once more assisted his loving friend to a leg up; and this time the leader of the New Lights was safely hoisted into his saddle. Ichabod then remounted his ass; but when the horse was put in motion, the donkey positively and sternly refused to budge an inch. There stood the stubborn animal just like a statue—gazing upon vacancy—and apparently nailed to the ground. Vainly did Mr. Paxwax coax him with sundry pattings on the neck—fruitlessly did he try the usual talismanic influence of "Gee up!" Not an inch would the beast move; but there he stood planted in the middle of the road, with the influential member of the New Lights upon his back looking quite as much like an ass as himself.

In fact, the appearance of the man and his donkey was *almost* as ridiculous as that of the equestrian statue of the Duke of Wellington perched on the arch at the corner of the Green Park; and therefore the reader may judge how very stolid indeed Mr. Ichabod Paxwax and his stubborn ass must have looked.

Fortunately for the hero of this dilemma a stage coach happened to pass at the time; and the coachman, instantaneously comprehending the position of affairs, bestowed such a cut with his whip upon the donkey that all his obstinacy evaporated in a moment—and kicking up his heels to the great discomfiture of Ichabod's equilibrium and the great aggravation of his physical sufferings, the beast started off into a sharp canter.

The whistling sound of the whip through the air was not lost upon the Rev. Mr. Sneaksby's Rozinante, which actually and positively broke into a gallop that must have even astonished itself and would have certainly struck its owner with surprise had he been present—seeing that the animal had not performed such a feat for the last ten years.

In this manner did the cavalcade proceed for a short distance; when the appearance of a public-house became the signal for a halt. There the two pious travellers got their clothes properly brushed; and Mr. Paxwax bathed his eye, which was indeed pretty nearly bunged up, as he himself had predicted. However, all his animosity vanished when he found that while he had been busy in abluting his optic, Mr. Sneaksby had ordered devilled kidneys and a quart of egg-flip—for both of which species of creature-comforts Mr. Paxwax entertained a considerable liking.

The refreshments were relished with a zest all the more keen inasmuch as the chosen vessels of the New Lights had breakfasted at the early hour of seven in order to commence their journey at half-past; and having disposed of the kidneys and the flip and read the landlord a homily upon brotherly love and the blessings of abstinence, they mounted their beasts and resumed their way.

The church-clock at Dartford was proclaiming the hour of noon when the Rev. Mr. Nathaniel Sneaksby and Mr. Ichabod Paxwax made their entry into that town.

"Hooray! brayvo?" yelled forth a parcel of boys who were playing at marbles in the middle of the street; and, hastily gathering up their "alley taws" and their "commoneys," they began dancing, and capering, and hooting, and bawling on either side of the sanctimonious travellers.

"Beware, boys—beware!" exclaimed Mr. Sneaksby, assuming a look of awful solemnity: "remember how the wicked youths were served who insulted Elisha! Are ye not afraid that bears will come forth from yon woods in the distance and eat ye up?"

"There b'aint no beers in these here parts," cried the ringleader of the juvenile mob: and as he "took a sight" at the reverend gentleman at the same time, his mischievous companions all became convulsed with laughter.

"Gee up!" vociferated another boy; and picking up a stick, he inflicted divers hard thwacks upon Mr. Sneaksby's horse.

"Now, then, old stubbornness!" cried a third urchin, addressing himself to the donkey: and while Mr. Paxwax was remonstrating with him upon the impropriety and ungodliness of his conduct, another boy quietly and cleverly attached a bramble to the animal's tail.

Thereupon the ass began to exhibit divers symptoms of uneasiness, to the infinite disgust and annoyance of Mr. Paxwax, who was scarcely able to retain his seat.

"Avaunt, incarnate imps of Satan!" he thundered forth, as his hands grasped the mane of the donkey: for the beast was kicking at one moment—running forward at another—then stopping short—then backing on the pavement in a manner most threatening to the shop windows—and then galloping on again at a rate which almost jolted its unhappy rider to pieces.

And all this time the mischievous boys were keeping up with the cavalcade—yelling, hooting, tossing up their caps in the air, and playing off the artillery of their jokes and gibes against the miserable victims of this juvenile persecution. The tradesmen came forth from their shops—windows were thrown open and crowded with faces—the passengers in the streets stopped to behold the amusing scene—and the "oldest inhabitant in the place" did not remember so extraordinary an excitement having ever before disturbed the tranquility of Dartford.

At length some individual took compassion on Mr. Paxwax and removed the bramble from the donkey's tail; and this same "good Samaritan" as Mr. Sneaksby denominated him, gave the necessary information to guide the pious travellers to the dwelling of the Rev. Joel Brugg. Accordingly, in a few minutes they reached a public-house which stood within a few yards of their destination; and having put up their cattle at that place of "accommodation for man and beast," they hastened to knock at Mr. Brugg's door, the persevering small boys forming a line along the edge of the pavement and indulging in sundry ironical cheers and jocular observations.

We must here pause for a few moments to state that the Rev. Joel Brugg was the founder and pastor of a certain sect bearing the name of Candelabrians, and who were tolerably numerous in Dartford and the adjacent districts. The house in which Mr. Brugg dwelt with the wife of his bosom and the numerous family upon whose countenance he had stamped his image—and a very curious one it was too, alike in the original and in its eleven miniature reflections—his house, we say, was a neat yellow-brick building, containing eight rooms, and having a piece of garden-ground at the back—the whole having been purchased by the money of the Candelabrians for the express behoof of their revered pastor and the numerous tribe of Bruggs.

The Rev. Joel himself was a tall, thin, bony man—not unlike Mr. Sneaksby in figure, but having a face of very tallowy complexion and thin black hair combed in a sleek manner over his forehead. He had large greenish eyes, bearing an amazing resemblance to boiled gooseberries; and his demeanour was as solemnly sanctimonious, his gait as demurely prim, his speech as deliberately measured, and his tone as awfully sepulchral as the most fastidious "saint" could possibly desire. His wife was as like him as if she had been his sister instead of his spouse: tall, thin, and hatchet-faced, she looked both the prude and the vixen—although Mr. Brugg was wont to represent her as "the very best woman in existence."

At the moment when Mr. Sneaksby and Mr. Paxwax knocked at the door, Mr. and Mrs. Brugg were in the middle of a pretty little domestic dispute relative to the dinner—or rather, what it was to consist of; for a pious Candelabrian had sent the pastor a sucking-pig in the morning, and the said pastor was desirous of having it cooked for that day's enjoyment—whereas Mrs. Brugg was equally anxious that the cold remains of a leg of mutton should be previously disposed of. The dispute was waxing so warm that the Rev. Joel Brugg was on the point of coming to blows with "the very best woman in existence," when the loud double knock fell upon their ears with startling effect; and the next moment they were frightened almost out of their wits by the yells, hootings, and hurrahings of the small boys forming the New Lights' escort.

A miserable, half-starved, dirty servant-of-all-work, whose age was about seventeen and who had a hungry eye and a famished look altogether, was hastily despatched to open the door; and the visitors were immediately conducted into the front parlour. The mob of juveniles then gave "one cheer more," and dispersed to resume their game with alley taws and commoneys.

Mr. and Mrs. Brugg were in the kitchen when the New Lights arrived at their house; and on the wretched servant delivering the names of those worthies, the pastor hastily observed to his wife, "Well, upon my word, my love, I think you were right after all, and we will keep the pig till to-morrow. For these chaps are certain to stay to dinner: indeed, we cannot possibly avoid asking them."

"Then mind we're water drinkers, Mr. Brugg," returned his better half, with a most emphatic significancy: "for I am not going to waste our money in buying spirits for them fellers, I can tell you."

"Certainly not, my dear—certainly not," exclaimed Joel, approvingly. "We're water-drinkers to the back-bone—for this day at least."

Having exchanged these hasty observations and arrived at so pleasant an understanding with each other, Mr. and Mrs. Brugg proceeded with solemn demeanour to the parlour.

"Welcome, good Brother Sneaksby—welcome, Brother Paxwax," said the Reverend Joel, pressing their hands cordially. "This is Mrs. Brugg, my dear friends—and I'm proud of the opportunity of introducing her to you. A nobler example of a wife cannot be found; indeed, she is in all respects the very best woman in existence."

"A virtuous woman is a crown to her husband, Brother Brugg," said the Rev. Mr. Sneaksby, after having paid his respects to the lady.

"Pray sit down, gentlemen—and make yourselves quite at home," she exclaimed, assuming as hospitable a demeanour as it was in her nature to put on. "But, dear me! what is the matter with the gentleman's eye?" she demanded, fixing her looks upon Ichabod's damaged optic.

"It was an injury received by my pious brother when engaged in the Lord's service," Mr. Sneaksby hastened to observe. "For, behold! as we journeyed along the great highway which men call the Dover Road, we observed certain ungodly vessels employed in breaking stones. The discourse of these benighted sinners did reach our ears; and it shocked us sorely to perceive that for every one harmless word that fell from their lips, they gave utterance to a dozen oaths. Brother Paxwax, ever zealous in the good cause, did spur his ass into a trot and ride forward to remonstrate with those men of Belial. Whereupon one of them, more deeply influenced by Satan than all the rest, did rise from his seat on the stones—gird up his loins——"

"And bung up my eye with his fist," added Mr. Paxwax, by way of affording a suitable peroration for his superior's pathetic narrative.

"Alas! it is our lot to receive stripes and be beaten with rods in the good service," said Mr. Joel Brugg, turning up the whites of his eyes and shaking his head solemnly. "But the divine grace and two leeches applied to-night, Brother Paxwax, will accomplish a cure. And now, my beloved friends, you will break bread with me—and then we will discourse upon the subject of your visit. My dear," he added, turning towards his wife, "what hast thou in the way of provender to offer unto these pious wayfarers?"

"A crust and a cup of cold water will suffice, dear Brother Brugg," said Mr. Sneaksby.

"Or anything that you may have provided for your own frugal meal, dear sister," observed Mr. Paxwax, addressing the lady: and at the same time he gave a sniff in order to ascertain whether there was any odour of roast meat in the house.

"Verily, and we would not insult your known virtues in respect to temperance, dear brethren, by placing before you the flesh-pots of Egypt," said the Rev. Joel Brugg.

"Assuredly not," added his better-half. "A morsel of cold mutton and a potatoe, with some water from a delicious spring in the neighbourhood, constitute our repast of this day, under the divine blessing: and to our humble board ye are truly welcome."

The Rev. Mr. Sneaksby's countenance became uncommonly blank for a moment, and Mr. Ichabod Paxwax made an awful face, as this frugal bill of fare was submitted to their consideration: but, in-

[CAROLINE WALTERS.]

stantly commanding their feelings, they laid the soothing unction to their souls that hospitable people very often speak modestly of the really handsome banquet which is forthcoming.

This happy delusion was however speedily dispelled by the entrance of the servant-of-all-work to lay the cloth, and by the appearance of the cold mutton, the dish of potatoes, and a large jug of water. Mr. Sneaksby and Mr. Paxwax exchanged rapid glances expressive of unmitigated disgust; and even their last hope that something better than the limpid element from the spring might be forthcoming, was totally destroyed when they saw the servant leave the room without receiving any instructions to fetch beer from the public-house.

The three eldest Masters Brugg and Miss Tabitha Brugg were now introduced to take their places at the dinner-table, they having the privilege of dining with their parents; while a terrific stamping, screaming, and quarrelling in the room overhead, showed pretty plainly that the more juvenile olive-branches of the Brugg genus were doomed to the ignominious captivity of the nursery

Mr. Joel Brugg now said a grace which lasted for nearly a quarter of an hour, and during which every one round the table held his head almost down into his plate: but Mr. Paxwax was all the while thinking to himself that the provender was by no means commensurate with the thanksgiving. However, as he was exceedingly hungry, in spite of the devilled kidneys and the egg-flip, he managed to devour his share of the cold mutton—an example which was worthily followed by the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby. For the sake of appearances they were likewise compelled to inflict the penalty of cold water upon their stomachs; and although Mr. Sneaksby gulped down his supply with as good a grace as he could assume, Mr. Paxwax could not possibly conceal his abhorrence for the primitive fluid.

The repast was ended—the cloth was removed—and the three boys had retired with Miss Tabitha, when the servant-of-all-work, either in ignorance of her mistress's parsimonious intentions, or else in a little spirit of spite for numerous petty acts of tyranny inflicted upon her, exclaimed in a loud tone as she stood on the threshold of the door, "Please, ma'am, shall I put the gin on the table and bring up the hot water *as usual?*"

Mr. Ichabod Paxwax actually bounded upon his chair in delight; and Mr. Sneaksby's mouth instantaneously began to water. These little circumstances were not lost upon Mr. and Mrs. Brugg, who exchanged rapid glances: for the domestic had committed a blunder which seriously compromised both their hospitality and their parsimony.

"Verily," said Mr. Paxwax, fearful lest a negative should be put upon the maid-of-all-work's proposal, "I think that a *leetle* drop of something warm would—would—do my eye good," he added, no better excuse suggesting itself at the instant.

"Well, then," exclaimed Mrs. Brugg sharply, and with a threatening look at the miserable servant, "if there does happen to be any gin in the house, we will break through an established rule and partake of a thimble-full each in honour of our beloved guests. You may bring up the hot water."

"Oh! I know there's plenty of gin in the bottle, ma'am," said the domestic: "because I got it filled yesterday at the public, and you and master only drank half of it."

"Go and get the hot water, I say," almost shrieked forth Mrs. Brugg, darting terrific glances at the unfortunate maid.

There was no help for it!—and the lady was accordingly compelled to open her cupboard and produce the bottle, much to the satisfaction of the New Lights. Glasses, hot-water, sugar, and lemons were speedily placed upon the table; and having brewed himself a good jorum, Ichabod was himself again!

But how cordially in her heart did Mrs. Brugg hate and detest both that individual and Mr. Sneaksby, when she saw them half fill their tumblers with gin before they poured in the water; and at every sip they took, she secretly wished that the steaming fluid might choke them. Indeed, being scarcely able to restrain her vexation, she was compelled to rush out into the kitchen and pour forth her envenomed feelings against the miserable servant; then, having thus far relieved herself, she hurried up into the nursery, where she found a vent for the remainder of her ill-humour by boxing the children's ears all round.

These two scenes of domestic life having passed off to her satisfaction, she returned to the parlour—but only to experience a horror and a consternation which, as she declared to some friend on a subsequent occasion, "almost proved the death of her:" for, lo and behold! while she was employed in thrashing her olive-branches in the nursery, Mr. Brugg had actually sent out for more gin!

"Well, my dearly-beloved friends," her husband began to say the moment she thus returned to the room—for he, prudent man! was anxious that she should catch the conciliatory words that he sent forth in order to avert a storm,—"I have already told you that my wife is the very best woman in existence——Oh! here you are, my dear!" he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself, as if he did not know that she had been standing for half a minute upon the threshold. "I was only telling our Christian friends what an excellent wife you are to me—and how hospitable you always prove yourself towards your guests——Ahem! my dear will you take a *leetle* drop more gin? It is good for the stomach's sake, as the Apostle said of wine."

"No, Mr. Brugg—I will *not* take another drop—and I beg that you will not either," exclaimed the irritated lady. "If these gentlemen choose to finish the bottle, let them—but *you* sha'n't help them, I can tell you;"—and as she resumed her seat she darted spiteful looks at the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby and Mr. Ichabod Paxwax.

"My dear, my dear," said the Rev. Joel Brugg in a tone of gentle remonstrance,—"I hope you will not prove otherwise than—than—the very best woman in existence."

"Now *you* leave me alone and go on with your business, whatever it may be," exclaimed Mrs. Brugg, folding her arms and leaning back in the chair in a very determined manner, as if she were performing the part of sentinel upon the gin-bottle, whereon her looks now remained fixed.

"Well, my Christian brethren," resumed Mr Brugg, casting uneasy glances from time to time at his wife,—"let us take into consideration the matter whereof ye are come to treat with me. And if my poor comprehension does not lead me astray, this visit on your part ariseth from certain observations which I made last week when I saw you in London."

"Yea, verily," responded Mr. Sneaksby: "for on that occasion thou didst hint at the possibility of the amalgamation of the pious Candelabrians with the blessed New Lights."

"And forasmuch as the Candelabrians are numerous and influential," said Mr. Brugg, "the New Lights should join us and become merged in our community."

"Nay, Brother Brugg," exclaimed Mr. Sneaksby, "the Candelabrians must become incorporated with the New Lights."

"Surely you are dreaming, Brother Sneaksby?" cried Mr. Brugg, becoming excited. "What? the Candelabrians resign that name which took me six months to think of and three more to fix the precise manner of spelling it? No, sir—no: it can't be done! Besides, when I founded the sect of Candelabrians, I meant to imply that they were the candles to light the world to the reading of the Scriptures——"

"And pray what else are the New Lights?" demanded Mr. Sneaksby, likewise growing irritable.

"Aye—what are the New Lights, I should like to know?" exclaimed Mr. Paxwax.

"Shall I tell you?" said Mrs. Brugg, her lips white and quivering with the vixenish ill-humour that stirred her soul.

"If you choose, ma'am," responded the Rev Nathaniel Sneaksby. "I should like to hear *your* opinion of the New Lights," he added, with a sarcastic emphasis.

"And so should I," said Mr. Paxwax. "Come ma'am—out with it—what are we?"

"Humbugs—rank humbugs!" ejaculated Mrs. Brugg. "There, now I've told you—and my mind's relieved of a weight."

Thus speaking, the virago started from her chair—seized upon the gin-bottle, the sugar, and the

lemons—and proceeded to look them all up in the cupboard: then, bouncing to the room door, she threw it wide open,—and stopping short upon the threshold, she turned towards her husband, exclaiming, "Now, Mr. Brugg, the sooner you get rid of them drunken New Lights, the better!"

And again bouncing onward, she hastened along a passage leading to the kitchen, the door of which she banged behind her with a violence that shook the whole house to its foundation.

"Brother Paxwax," said Mr. Sneaksby, rising from his chair as soon as he had somewhat recovered from the stupefaction into which this extraordinary proceeding threw him,—"we are in the tents of the ungodly, and it is time for us to be gone."

"Brother Sneaksby," responded Ichabod, likewise quitting his seat,—"we cannot remain beneath this inhospitable fig-tree any longer—for the gin has disappeared," he added, in a low voice to himself.

"My dear Christian friends," said Mr. Brugg, imploringly—for he was afraid that the scene would be reported abroad to his discredit,—"I humbly beseech you to pardon this treatment on the part of—of—the very best woman in existence."

"May the devil take such women—and you too, sir," cried the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby, unable to keep a rein upon his temper any longer. "I never saw such an accursed termagant in all my life."

"Nor I such a wretched hen-pecked old fool," cried Mr. Paxwax, rushing out into the passage as he spoke and opening the front door, for fear that his remark might provoke Mr. Brugg to hurl the jug of hot water at his head. "Come along, Brother Sneaksby."

"I am coming, Brother Paxwax," said this reverend gentleman, who was not quite such a coward as his satellite: and having flung a look of mingled ferocity and contempt upon the astounded Joel Brugg, he stalked majestically out of the house, leaving the front door wide open behind him.

Repairing to the public-house where they had put up their cattle, the two New Lights sate down in the parlour and began to console themselves with steaming jorums of gin-punch for the insult and inhospitality which they had experienced at Brother Brugg's;—and as the injuries which their feelings had sustained were manifold and deep, the amount of solace required was necessarily proportionate. But as this solace consisted in gin-punch, in the same ratio that it lightened their hearts so did it lighten their heads; and when at about four o'clock in the afternoon they paid their bill and issued forth to mount their beasts, their pace was so unsteady that they mutually agreed there never was a place with such wretchedly loose and uneven pavement in all the world as Dartford.

Followed by the broad grins of the landlord, the hostler, and several hangers-on about the inn, the pious travellers commenced their journey homeward. But again had they to endure the persecution of the small boys, who, perceiving the inebriated condition of the two sanctimonious vessels, became perfectly uproarious in their glee and so extremely practical in their jokes that Mr. Sneaksby had two falls from his horse and Mr. Paxwax three from his ass before the limits of Dartford were reached. At length the urchins took leave of them; and they pursued their way without farther molestation of that kind.

Presently a tremendous shower of rain began to fall; and the two leaders of the New Lights were speedily wet through to the skin. Vainly did they urge on their beasts to gain the nearest way-side public-house: the horse proved almost as obstinate as the donkey—and before a sheltering roof even appeared in sight, the reverend travellers were completely drenched. The water poured down from the broad brims of their hats as if they were sluices opened for the occasion; and never did human beings look or feel more thoroughly miserable. At length they put up at a tavern, where they resolved to sup and pass the night; and with sorrow be it recorded that the Rev. Nathaniel Sneaksby and his friend Mr. Ichabod Paxwax were conveyed blind drunk to bed.

On the following morning they resumed their journey, the weather having cleared up; and with faces woefully elongated by reason of the head-ache which they experienced and the remorseful memories which filled their brains, they entered the metropolis at about mid-day. Proceeding straight to the stables where they had hired the mettled charger and the noble donkey, they felt a perfect relief when they thus got rid of their cattle; and hastening to Jermyn Street, they made such improvements in their toilette as rendered them fit to present themselves to the august synod of New Light Elders assembled in the vestry-room of Salem to receive them.

The reader will scarcely require to be informed that they denounced in the strongest terms the inhospitable conduct of the Rev. Joel Brugg of Dartford; but in giving an account of their visit and its failure, neither Mr. Sneaksby nor Mr. Paxwax thought it at all necessary to state how tremendously tipsy they had both got.

CHAPTER CXLIX.

THE AFFLICTED MAIDEN.

In the morning after the adventures at the masquerade, Pauline Clarendon awoke in a magnificently furnished bed-chamber,—the canopy overhanging the couch and the tops of the looking-glass frames being surmounted with ducal coronets.

For a few instants she was a prey to a wild bewilderment as she cast her eyes around: but almost immediately her ideas settled themselves into the proper places in her brain,—and she recollected all that had occurred on the preceding evening—where she was now—and how she came thither. Then, as the fancied perfidy of Lord Florimel rose uppermost in her mind and dominated all her other thoughts, she buried her countenance in the pillow and gave way to an agonised ebullition of grief.

The flood of tears which she thus poured forth, relieved her somewhat;—and she had just dried the pearly drops upon her long lashes and her pale cheeks, when the door opened gently and the brilliant Duchess of Devonshire entered the apartment.

"My dearest Pauline," she exclaimed, approaching the bed and taking the young lady's hand, "do tell me what has happened! Nothing has occurred to Octavia, I hope——"

"Nothing, my generous friend—my noble benefactress," said Pauline. "But I must apologise

most sincerely for seeking your abode last night—especially in a masquerade apparel and totally unattended——"

"Do not say anything in the shape of an excuse, Pauline," interrupted the Duchess, seating herself by the bed-side: "but tell me what you will in the form of an explanation, as between friends. Something unpleasant has happened, I am very sure—for your eyes are red with weeping, and moreover I am well aware that this masquerading adventure was no idle whim nor foolish freak on your part."

"Your surmise is correct, my kind friend," observed the young lady, subduing with a violent effort a fresh outbreak of her grief.

"I knew you too well—understand your character too profoundly—and entertain too high an opinion of you, Pauline," said the Duchess, "to imagine for a moment that you would venture alone to a masquerade without some strong and sufficient reason. Therefore, even if you should refuse me your confidence, I shall not think the less favourably of you."

"But I do not intend to refuse you my confidence," exclaimed Pauline. "I have received too many kindnesses at your hands not to regard you as the best friend I have in the world. When circumstances forced me to abandon my father's dwelling, you offered me a home—and a home has your Grace likewise provided for my unfortunate sister. Do not, therefore, imagine for a moment that I am unmindful of all you have done for me, or ungrateful for the many bounties of which I have been the recipient."

"I know that you are good, and amiable, and candid, my sweetest friend," said the Duchess; "and on that account I have conceived a warm affection for you. Tell me if there be any way in which I can still serve you—and you may rely upon my zeal and readiness in your cause."

"First let me unbosom myself to your Grace," answered Pauline; "and then I may perhaps have a favour to implore at your hands."

Having thus spoken, the young lady took up some of her masquerading apparel which lay on a chair near the bed; and drawing forth a letter from the bosom of the dress, she handed it to the Duchess of Devonshire.

The contents of that billet were as follow:—

"Lord Florimel is unfaithful to you. While affecting a complete reformation in his conduct, his private life is as profligate as ever; but his intrigues are carried on with a greater circumspection. To-morrow night he will be present at a masquerade at Covent Garden Theatre, disguised in a blue domino edged with a peculiar braiding and having a star of the same material on the top or crown of the hood. The object of his visit to that scene is a new love intrigue; and you may convince yourself with your own eyes that such is the fact. The writer of this note is animated by no other desire than a sincere wish to prevent so much virtue, generous confidence, amiability, and candour being sacrificed to such profound hypocrisy, such foul deceit, and such unpardonable treachery: for by all those virtues are you characterised—and by all *these* faults is Lord Florimel distinguished.

"Well aware that you are so utterly unacquainted with all the arts of London dissipation, as to be ignorant even how to proceed in order to procure at so short a notice a suitable disguise for the purpose which this letter naturally suggests, the writer has made the necessary arrangements at a respectable fancy-dress warehouse in London (the card of which is enclosed). The mistress of the establishment will have a chamber prepared for you to perform your toilette in the strictest privacy; and you can proceed thence in a hackney-coach to the theatre, which is at no great distance from the warehouse.

"One word more. The writer positively and earnestly enjoins you not to address a syllable of reproach to Lord Florimel within the walls of the theatre. You are even forbidden to accost him in a manner that may enable him to guess who you are. On the contrary, you must restrain your feelings and take time to deliberate upon the proper course to be subsequently pursued."

"I need not ask whether you received confirmation of the suspicions which this anonymous letter excited," said the Duchess of Devonshire, in a tone of the profoundest sympathy, when she had brought the perusal of the document to a close. "Alas! my dear friend, those tears which are falling from your eyes prove that the information was indeed too true."

"Too true — yes — too true!" murmured Pauline, the big drops chasing each other down her cheeks and falling upon her fair virginal bosom as she sate up in the bed gazing with a look of the deepest affliction upon Georgiana. "This letter, which is dated, as you perceive, the day before yesterday and is addressed to me at your own villa near Aylesbury, I received early yesterday morning; and confiding my poor sister to the care of the nurse, I came to London. At the warehouse mentioned in the note I purchased that fancy dress; and having assumed it, I proceeded to the theatre. The masque in the blue domino with the curious braiding was already there: but at first it struck me that he was too tall for Gabriel. However, after a time I mustered up courage to accost him; and, reckless of the injunctions so emphatically expressed in the concluding portion of the note, I asked who he was. Then, doubtless believing me to be the fair one whom he expected to meet at that place, he instantaneously announced himself as Lord Florimel—yes, and in such terms too, that left no doubt as to his perfidy."

Pauline stopped short, her voice almost suffocated with the deep sobs which rent her bosom; and the Duchess, throwing her arms around the young lady's neck, besought her to moderate her grief.

"Oh! my dearest, dearest friend," exclaimed Pauline, in a more hurried and painful accent than before, "you cannot wonder if my heart be ready to burst with this woe which is too vast for it to contain! For I have loved your perfidious cousin—Oh! I have loved him as never woman loved before; and when his own lips, breathing his name in my ear last night, confirmed the terrible suspicion that was already rending my soul, 'twas as if the knell of doom were reverberating within the living cells of my brain! Boundless was my affection—an illimitable flood of the tenderest feelings, knowing no ebb, but ever gushing with the impulse of love's spring-tide. Conceive, then, how fearful is the anguish attendant upon the reaction of such a love as this—and how every nerve must quiver with an ineffable excruciation. And, oh! if it were not that a feeling of pride—nay, rather of proud indignation—now sustained me, I should sink beneath the weight of this blow so cruel—so undeserved—so unexpected!"

And as Pauline gave utterance to this last sentence, her countenance, a moment before so pale, became suddenly flushed with a crimson hue—and

the pearly tears which still stood upon her cheeks, shone lustrous as the dew-drops on the pomegranate.

"Had Gabriel remained true to his plight and faithful to the solemn promises which he so profusely breathed in my ears," she continued, after a long pause, and now speaking in a deep, low tone,—"mine would have proved a lot fraught with a happiness which no power of language can describe. But, alas!" she exclaimed, in a voice denoting a sudden and irresistible self-abandonment to the full tide of bitter affliction, while she pressed her hand forcibly upon her bosom as if to silence the beatings of her heart,—"alas! that dream of bliss has now been destroyed — the vision has fled, never to return."

"Oh! speak not thus despondingly, my dearest Pauline," said the generous-hearted Georgiana. "Let me become the peace-maker between you——"

"No, my kind friend—*that* may not be," interrupted the young lady, her voice and manner suddenly resuming their wonted firmness. "The bond which linked our hearts is for ever broken—and nothing can restore my confidence in Gabriel. I loved him not for his fortune nor his title: I loved him for himself alone—and after all that occurred last night, there is an end of everything between us. But I have not yet explained to your Grace the termination of my adventures and how I came to seek the protection and security of your abode. On leaving the theatre, I remembered that I had not informed the people at the fancy-dress warehouse that I should return to lay aside my masquerading attire and resume my own garb; and I knew that it was then too late to disturb the mistress of the shop. I accordingly entered a vehicle and ordered the coachman to drive me to a respectable hotel. But I was already the object of an infamous conspiracy set on foot by that royal profligate to whom my poor sister is indebted for her ruin," added Pauline, with exceeding bitterness of tone and great excitement of manner.

"What! the Prince dared to persecute *you?*" ejaculated the Duchess of Devonshire, who, in spite of her own levity of conduct and deficiency of virtuous principle, was shocked at the idea which Pauline's words had engendered in her mind.

"Yes—his Royal Highness dared to make me the object of his tender persecution," responded the young lady, still speaking in a tone of bitterness; "and, in pursuance of the intrigues which he had set on foot to ensnare me, I was taken to the infamous dwelling of Mrs. Brace the milliner, instead of to a respectable hotel."

"Oh! this is really too bad!" exclaimed Georgiana, in no affected tone of indignation. "He ought to have remembered that you were the sister of one who was already too deeply afflicted on his account."

"The future Sovereign of these realms knows neither generosity nor remorse," said Pauline, emphatically; "and despite of my representations—my reproaches—my entreaties, he would have ruined me——Oh! my God! he would have ruined me," she cried, shuddering all over at the recollection of the tremendous danger in which she had been involved,—"had not my screams brought assistance. I escaped from his arms—I escaped from the house—and throwing myself into a vehicle which happened to be passing through the Square at the moment, I ordered the coachman to take me to a dwelling where I knew that friendship would afford me a secure asylum. And that dwelling is Devonshire House."

"Where you are truly welcome, Pauline," exclaimed the Duchess, in a compassionating tone. "I am grieved that I was not at home last night when you arrived: for perhaps the solace which a sincere friend might have proffered, would not have proved unwelcome. On returning from Lady Dewhurst's, at whose residence his Grace and myself had passed the evening, I was amazed to hear that you had come to pay Devonshire House so unexpected a visit—and I hurried hither to ascertain whether anything unpleasant had occurred. But you were sleeping so soundly——"

"Ah! my kind friend, I was exhausted in mind and body," exclaimed Pauline, the tears once more starting forth upon her long lashes;—"and I slept profoundly, it is true — but my slumbers were haunted with hideous dreams. However, I must strive to combat against the sorrow which now weighs upon me like an almost intolerable burthen, and beneath which all my energies, mental and physical, seem to bend."

"And you will not permit me to act as a peace-maker between my faithless cousin Florimel and yourself?" said the splendid Georgiana, in a tone which testified how cheerfully she would undertake the task of pacification.

"No—never!" replied Pauline, with a resolute manner. "A thousand, thousand times do I thank your Grace for this generous desire to interfere in my behalf: but, although I can never cease to love Lord Florimel, yet I dare not risk the utter and total wreck of my peace of mind by becoming the wife of a man who makes solemn pledges so lightly and breaks them so easily. Your Grace will therefore confer an infinite favour upon me by pressing that point no more. And now,—as I wish to withdraw myself altogether from the possibility of receiving either visits or letters from Lord Florimel—and as I am likewise anxious to seek that seclusion which may shield me against any fresh persecutions that his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales may possibly think fit to institute with regard to me,—I purpose to retire with my unfortunate sister to some quiet neighbourhood, where I may pass my time in ministering to the cure of her wounded spirit and surrounding her with consolations when the restoration of her intellects will render such solace needful."

"And in what manner, my dear Pauline," asked the Duchess, "can I assist your views in this respect?"

"By adding pecuniary succour to the generous aid your Grace has already afforded me," was the response. "I will not apply to my father: but I do not hesitate to solicit this boon at your hands, because I feel so much confidence in your friendship——"

"Enough, my dear Pauline," interposed the Duchess of Devonshire. "If you were to act otherwise than in this spirit of affectionate reliance, I should have been deeply grieved. And now tell me where you would like to fix your abode?"

"Previously to my father's removal to Cavendish Square," answered Pauline, "we resided in a pretty little house on a terrace called Paradise Villas, in the Edgeware Road. For upwards of eighteen months did we dwell there; and I feel some secret and unaccountable impulse urging me

to return to that once happy home. Both the Prince and Lord Florimel are aware that we once resided there: but they would never think of seeking me in my former abode. It is consequently my intention to repair thither presently and ascertain if the house which we lately occupied is still to let."

"Indeed, my dear Pauline, you shall not take that trouble upon yourself," exclaimed Georgiana. "You shall repose a few hours longer: for you are doubtless fatigued in body as well as in mind—and your breakfast shall be sent up to you in a few minutes. At mid-day you shall accompany me in the carriage to see all that I may have done for you in the meantime,—and then you shall hasten to Aylesbury to fetch Octavia."

Having thus spoken, the good-hearted Duchess kissed Pauline's cheek with a pure sisterly affection, and then hurried from the room to escape the expressions of gratitude which the young lady, with tears streaming down her countenance, began to utter in a voice broken by emotions.

In about a quarter of an hour a female servant made her appearance with a silver tray covered with the materials for an excellent breakfast: but poor Pauline had no appetite for any of the luxuries thus provided. Having partaken, however, of a cup of chocolate, she requested writing materials to be brought to her; and she also desired that a messenger might be sent to the fancy-dress warehouse to procure the apparel which she had left there on the preceding evening. These instructions were complied with; and having risen from the sumptuous couch and performed her toilette, Pauline sat down to pen a few lines to Lord Florimel.

Then, as she pondered — painfully pondered— upon the style which she ought to adopt, the words uttered by the Gipsy-masque at the theatre on the preceding evening, recurred to her memory;— and she slowly repeated them over to herself.

"*When a virtuous woman's dignity is offended by a faithless lover, she does not write a long letter of mingled complaint, upbraiding, and reproach: but she pens a few laconic words, commanding him to seek her presence no more, and leaving him to calculate and weigh all the motives which have suggested a proceeding at once so dignified and imperious.*"

And, her mind yielding to the bias of these suggestions, she indited a letter in the spirit thereof: but the precise nature of its contents will be explained hereafter.

Securing the billet in the bosom of her dress, to be posted only when her removal into her contemplated seclusion should have taken place, Pauline anxiously awaited the return of the Duchess. Punctual to her promise, the beautiful and generous-hearted Georgiana repaired to the young lady's chamber, ready apparelled in her carriage-dress; and, the vehicle being in attendance, they issued forth together.

On being seated in the carriage, the Duchess ordered the coachman to drive to Paradise Villas, Edgeware Road: then, as the vehicle rolled away from Devonshire House, she turned with an arch smile towards Pauline, observing, "The three hours which have elapsed since I left you, my dear friend, have not been wasted, as you shall presently see. His Grace, whom I made acquainted with the purpose which I entertained on your behalf, instantaneously despatched his agent to take the business in hand; and considerable progress is no doubt already made in the matter."

Pauline could only express her gratitude by tears: for her feelings were too deeply touched to allow the utterance of words. The Duchess continued to discourse with her in the kindest manner; and in a short time the carriage stopped in front of Paradise Villas. From the window did Pauline cast her looks at the house where she had spent so many happy days,—the house in which she had first become acquainted with Florimel,—the house, too, where the Prince of Wales, under the name of Mr. Harley, had poured his insidious love-tales into the ears of her sister. There was much of mingled bitterness and pleasure in the reminiscences thus suddenly called up in the young lady's mind; but, even if the latter feeling did not altogether predominate, there was nevertheless a melancholy charm in the prospect of returning to an abode she had once loved and every feature of which was so familiar to her recollection.

On alighting from the carriage, the Duchess and Pauline entered the house, the door of which was standing open;—and in the front parlour they found two respectable-looking elderly gentlemen, both of whom saluted Georgiana with the profoundest respect. One of them was the Duke of Devonshire's agent—and the other his solicitor; and in this capacity were they forthwith introduced to Pauline.

But before there was leisure to exchange a word upon matters of business, a waggon, laden with furniture, stopped in front of the house;—and Pauline, now fully comprehending all the generous zeal which Georgiana had exercised in her behalf, threw herself upon that noble lady's bosom and wept plenteously. The agent and the attorney were much moved by this pathetic scene;—and when that first ebullition of feeling was expended, Pauline was enabled to bestow her attention to the men of business.

In a few words the agent informed her that, immediately upon receiving the Duke's instructions at nine o'clock that morning, he had ascertained who was the proprietor of the house in question; and, being fortunate enough to find that individual at home, the projected transaction was speedily arranged between them. In fine, the house had been purchased in the name of Miss Pauline Clarendon; and the Duke's attorney had been called in to assist in the drawing up of a provisional deed making over the property to the young lady, until the more formal and elaborate conveyance could be effected. In the meantime the Duke's upholsterer had received certain instructions, the result of which was the arrival of the waggon laden with furniture, and attended by several men to put down the carpets and fit up the entire premises as promptly as many hands could work and money could inspire them with the requisite acivity.

Vain were it to attempt to describe the mingled joy and gratitude of Pauline on receiving all these munificent proofs of the friendship entertained for her by the Duchess of Devonshire: suffice it to say that if her words fell short in expressing her feelings, her looks made up for the deficiency. And the noble lady—the authoress of this generous work—what were *her* emotions? Oh! never until then had she experienced so full and profound an appreciation of the value of riches as a means to do good;—and many a frailty—many an error—many a fault,—aye

and much want of virtuous principle in the general routine of her existence,—were atoned for by the fostering succour thus afforded to an otherwise friendless, persecuted, and unhappy maiden!

On returning to Devonshire House, Pauline partook of luncheon with her kind-hearted friend; and, the Duke's travelling-carriage having been ordered in the meantime, the young lady took an affectionate leave of the Duchess and set out for the villa near Aylesbury. There her preparations for departure were soon made; and Octavia, whose aberration of intellect had within the last few days assumed the form of a harmless childishness, was delighted when she comprehended that she was to take a ride in the travelling-carriage. The nurse who had all along attended upon the unfortunate victim of royal lust, accompanied the sisters to their new home—or rather, on this return to their former one;—and it was about eleven o'clock at night when the party reached Paradise Villas in the Edgeware Road.

Pauline had entertained some apprehensions relative to the effect which this removal to a familiar scene might produce upon her sister; and during the journey thither from the vicinage of Aylesbury, she had more than once regretted her resolution to take up her future abode in that house where Octavia had first met the Prince. But those alarms proved unfounded, and, indeed, rather experienced an opposite result: for on entering her former home, Octavia appeared to recognise it, changed though it were by the handsome furniture which now constituted its comfort and its tasteful elegance—and the unfortunate young lady, throwing herself upon Pauline's bosom, burst into a flood of tears.

From that day forth a gradual improvement was visible in the mental condition of Octavia Clarendon.

CHAPTER CL.

THE LAWYER AND HIS MYSTERIOUS VISITRESS.

THE reader will observe it was on the day following the masquerade at Covent Garden Theatre that the adventures of Mr. Sneaksby and Ichabod Paxwax occurred on the one hand, and that the incidents chronicled in the preceding chapter took place on the other. It was likewise on this same day, and at about the hour of noon, that a young female, neatly apparelled and enveloped in a cloak, alighted from a hackney-coach at the entrance to Featherstone Buildings, Holborn.

Passing into that place, she examined the brass-plates on the doors and the inscriptions on the door-posts, until her eyes encountered the name of MR. RIGDEN painted on one of the latter; and forthwith entering the Clerks' Office, she inquired if she could see the attorney himself. The reply was in the affirmative; and her name was requested. This however she refused to give,—observing that Mr. Rigden did not know her, but that her business was of considerable importance. Finally, after one of the clerks had communicated with his master, the young woman was introduced to that gentleman's private office.

"Be seated," said Mr. Rigden, taking a rapid but searching survey of the visitress, as if he sought to penetrate into the nature of her business even before she had begun to explain it;—and he saw before him a very pretty female—almost a girl—of short stature, and whose countenance wore an air of deep decision and firmness of purpose.

In obedience to his invitation, she took a chair: then, fixing her eyes for a few moments upon Mr. Rigden's features, she scrutinised them in her turn, as if to assure herself that he was a man to whom she might confide some purpose which she had in view. Rapid and even furtive as that survey was, Mr. Rigden did not fail to notice it;—and the profoundly experienced man of business full well comprehended its meaning and purport. Imagining, therefore, that the mystery attendant upon the visitress and the very nature of that scrutinising look which she had fixed upon him, augured the development of an affair of more than usual importance, he said a few words to encourage her to open the requisite explanations.

"May I consider, sir," said the young woman, "that if nothing should come of the discourse which we may presently have together, the subject of that conversation shall remain a profound secret?"

"Unless you divulge to me any crime the punishment of which is demanded by the laws of society," responded the wary solicitor, "I shall as a matter of course look upon the object of your visit as strictly confidential."

The young woman did not appear quite satisfied with this answer; and she reflected profoundly for upwards of a minute, during which Mr. Rigden took snuff with an air of calm indifference.

"If you feel interested, sir, in the claims or pretensions of a particular client," the girl at length said, "would you not be grateful to any one who could assist you in the furtherance of that client's interests?"

"Most assuredly," answered the lawyer: then, in a measured and significant tone, he added, "I should likewise know how to reward the individual rendering such succour."

"But if this succour were of somewhat an equivocal character?" said the young woman, inquiringly.

"There are many things which in the ordinary affairs of life deserve the name of subterfuges, equivocations, unjust dealings, and the taking of improper advantages, but which come within the legitimate course of procedure in legal matters."

And having given this reply, which, though guarded and cautious, was still encouraging, the attorney took another pinch of snuff.

"The production or the suppression of a document in a law-suit is frequently attended with the most important results, I believe?" said the young woman, evidently acquiring confidence, and yet feeling her way with the utmost care.

"As a matter of course," exclaimed Mr. Rigden "and it is the province of the lawyer to avail himself of all those advantages which circumstances may throw in his way. Nor must he be over nice in looking into the source whence those advantages emanate."

Again the girl reflected deeply for a few moments;—and again did Mr. Rigden regale his nostrils with snuff.

"Suppose, sir," resumed the strange visitress, "that you were interested for a client whose cause depended upon the production of certain papers or the part of his opponent;—and suppose some one had the power of rendering it impossible for that

opponent to produce these necessary papers? Would you countenance this *some one* in such a line of conduct?"

"I have yet to learn," said Mr. Rigden, "that it is a crime, or a dishonour, or even an impropriety for an attorney to buy off a hostile witness or keep him out of the way, if possible. On the contrary, this is done every day, and enters into the widely ramified proceedings of legitimate law-chicanery. And again, if certain papers, constituting in themselves important testimony, are to be purchased either for production or suppression, I do not think that the King's Attorney-General would hesitate to enter into such a transaction; and what the Attorney-General would do, a humble individual such as Mr. Rigden need not blush to accomplish."

"In plain terms, then," said the girl, now fixing her eyes with a keen significance upon the lawyer, "you are prepared to enter into a transaction which is quite safe and secure and will no doubt put a large sum of money into your pocket?"

"And into yours also — eh?" observed Mr. Rigden, suffering his cold and almost stern features to relax for a moment into a smile.

"No, sir—not a farthing!" exclaimed the young woman, with impassioned vehemence.

"How nothing?" demanded the attorney, in astonishment.

"Because my motives are not mercenary, sir," was the immediate response. "And on that point I beg to decline any explanation whatsoever."

"Then if your motives be not mercenary, there is assuredly greater confidence to be placed in you," said the lawyer, with a view of encouraging his visitress to proceed. "Come—we are alone—in a place where no eaves-dropper can overhear what passes between us—and you have already felt your way with sufficient precaution. Do you understand me?"

"Yes," was the reply; "and I will no longer hesitate to explain the object of my presence here. You have a client, Mr. Rigden, who believes that he has certain claims upon the title and estates now in the enjoyment of Lord Florimel?"

"Exactly so," said the attorney. "But how came you with this information?"

"That is my business," observed the young woman, laconically. "It is true, then, that you have such a client: and you are doubtless anxious to put him in possession of all that he claims?"

"Such is the aim of every attorney who enjoys the confidence of his client," returned Mr. Rigden, taking snuff consequentially.

"And an affair of such importance would not only prove most lucrative, but also of great advantage to your professional reputation?" continued the girl.

"I shall not affect any fastidiousness by denying those propositions," said the lawyer, marvelling at the acuteness of so young a creature in probing as it were the very thoughts which he was revolving in his mind at the moment.

"But in order to ensure the success of your client," she proceeded, "it is necessary that Lord Florimel should be unable to produce certain documents."

"Such is the fact," replied Mr. Rigden, now becoming more deeply interested than ever in the present discourse.

"And if any one were to place those deeds in your hands," said the girl, in a low, measured, and solemn tone, "would you send them back to Lord Florimel with a letter informing him how you became possessed of them?—in a word, what would you do with them?"

Mr. Rigden took snuff and gazed intently upon the young woman in order to read in her countenance all that was passing in her mind: then satisfied with the result of a scrutiny from which she did not wince, he said in a voice as low, measured, and solemn as her own had just been—"If I had those documents in my possession, I should keep them!"

"And would you know at a glance, if they were placed before you, whether they were the right ones or not?" demanded the girl, her eyes flaming up with the lustre of joy and triumph as that response which the lawyer gave fell upon her ears.

"Yes—at a glance," he immediately rejoined.

"Then are these the documents your client requires?" she exclaimed, rising from her seat and producing from beneath her cloak a bundle of parchments and other deeds tied round with red tape.

Mr. Rigden, forgetting his usual cold tranquillity of manner, greedily extended his hands to grasp the papers: but the young woman made an imperious motion for him to desist. She then opened the parcel and allowed him to peruse the first lines of the principal document—observing at the same time, "If they be not the deeds which you require, I shall not leave them with you."

"But they are—they are!" exclaimed Mr. Rigden, becoming perfectly excited with joy: for the prospects of a lucrative suit and the fame of conducting such a cause to a successful issue—together with *other considerations*—instantaneously sprang up in his imagination.

"And you will make use of those papers to forward the views of your client and ruin Lord Florimel?" said the girl, her countenance becoming ghastly pale and almost hideous with the workings of evil passions in her bosom—so that the keen-sighted attorney had now no difficulty in fathoming the motive which was instigating her in the present proceeding.

"What guarantee can you give me that the present transaction will remain enveloped in eternal secrecy?" asked the lawyer. "Remember, you are a stranger to me—you have not even told me who you are nor whence you come—and you may have taken this step in a moment of spite——"

"Oh! I can give you the best guarantee which it is in mortal power to afford," exclaimed the young girl, her stature appearing to become more elevated as she drew herself up in the sublimity of her wrath and her triumph—while her countenance grew animated with a supernal lustre, as if it caught the reflection of those flames which were burning in the hell of her heart. "And that guarantee," she continued, in the exalted tone of a Pythoness dealing forth terrible oracles, "is the eternal—the undying—the unquenchable vengeance of an outraged woman! There, sir—*now* you have learnt my secret—now you are acquainted with my motive—and now also you read the whole history of my shame! It was not my intention to have revealed to you all this: but you demanded a guarantee and I give you one! For, as truly as there is a God above us and

a Satan in the realms beneath us,—so surely will my vengeance endure until the lips which are giving utterance to these words shall be silenced by the cold hand of death, and until the heart which cherishes the fervid hope of crushing a wretch down unto the very dust, shall cease to beat in the silent tomb! Think you, then, that I will betray you?—think you that I shall prove a traitress to myself?"

"No—I do not entertain such a thought—*now* that you have spoken thus candidly," said Mr. Rigden. "I accept the guarantee—and I promise to make a good use of the documents," he added in a significant tone. "But will you not accept of any reward?"

"Not a farthing!" exclaimed the girl, proudly. "Do you not know a woman's mind better than to make her such a proposal after all I have just said to you? But it is useless to waste more time upon *that* point: for few are the beings of your sex who do appreciate the extent of virtue, love, and self-sacrifice of which a woman is capable—nor, on the other hand, comprehend the nature of the vengeance which she craves when outraged. Farewell sir!"

With these words, the strange visitress took her departure, leaving Mr. Rigden as much amazed at her extraordinary character and proceedings as he was rejoiced at the object and result of the interview.

CHAPTER CLI.

THE MENDICANT FAMILY.

Upwards of a week had now passed since Mrs. Melmoth and her children were thrust forth into the open streets to beg their bread.

In Whitehall had they first taken their stand: and for hours not a penny was disbursed to them

by the passers-by—not a hand was stretched out to their relief.

If a carriage stopped near the place where the poor family had taken their stand, and if the elder boy ventured to creep towards the door with shivering limbs, naked feet, and tears rolling down his sunken cheeks, the rough stern voice of a flunkey wearing the ostentatious garb of a vile servitude, sent him back again cowering to his mother's side;—and the elegantly-dressed ladies in the vehicle would remark amongst themselves "how disagreeable it was to have the streets so terribly infested with beggars!"

And yet one poor sixpence from the purse of either of those magnificent dames would have been received with thankfulness—Oh! such thankfulness!

The shades of evening were already beginning to gather upon the mighty Babylon, when a poor female servant, out of place and seeking a situation, took compassion upon the wretched family; and having asked the mother a few questions, thrust a shilling into her hand. Mrs. Melmoth saw only *one* other shilling remaining in the tender-hearted young woman's purse; and she was loath to receive such generous alms from a good creature who was herself standing on the threshold of want. But the servant-maid darted away with tears streaming from her eyes;—and Mrs. Melmoth was enabled to procure a morsel of bread for her children and an asylum for the night.

But where was that night passed? In one of those filthy low lodging-houses which are frequented by thieves, tramps, and mendicants, and to which poverty compels the honest to resort! Forced to herd with the vilest of the vile and the most degraded of all society's innumerable outcasts, Mrs. Melmoth gathered her children around her in a corner of the room which was filled to suffocation and the atmosphere of which was fetid enough to breathe a pestilence;—and while the young ones slept through sheer exhaustion, she could not withdraw her looks from that terrible and tremendous future into which they nevertheless plunged with horror and dismay.

For, what was to become of herself and children? Even if they remained beggars and subsisted by begging,—even if the wretched avocation of mendicancy should raise up a slight barrier between themselves and actual starvation,—what prospects were there for the poor innocents who now slept in her arms or with their heads upon her lap? Had the trade of the street-beggar no contamination?—was it not the apprenticeship for the more finished and perilous pursuits of the thief?—and how could she hope that her children would pass unharmed through the terrible ordeal?

Oh! her anguish knew no bounds when she thought of all this: and she wept in silence over her sleeping children—but, great God! what bitter tears were those which she thus shed in torrents! Talk of the pains of the rack—the question by water—the thumb-screw—and the iron boot;—talk of the agony attendant upon the most fearful surgical operations which are known to men;—talk of the mental excruciation endured at the instant when the criminal stands upon the drop with the executioner fastening the halter about his neck;—talk of the rapid gush of poignant feelings which traverse the brain of the drowning wretch,—Oh! all these were an enviable paradise compared with the rending misery which that poor woman suffered while thus she foreshadowed the appalling pictures of the future.

A night of brain-searing sensations was that which she passed;—and on the morrow she turned out into the streets again, holding the babe in her arms and with the other three children clinging to her scanty vesture.

Presently an old lady, followed by a handsome footman in gorgeous livery, passed slowly down Whitehall. The flunkey carried a French poodle in his arms—for the beast was so pampered as to be unable to walk; and the old lady would rather have heard that an entire city with hundreds of thousands of human creatures had been swallowed up by an earthquake, than that her obese poodle suffered the slightest ill-treatment. With stately step did the flunkey march behind his mistress: for *he* too was fat and sleek with good living—and there was a certain air of conscious importance about him, as if he were something more to the old lady than a mere footman. And just at the very moment that he was passing the poor family, he took a piece of rich cake from his pocket and held it conveniently to the dog's mouth so that the brute might eat it without the necessity of moving anything but its jaws;—and the old lady, glancing behind her, threw a look of approval upon the domestic when she saw how careful he was of her beloved poodle. But, Oh! what famished, eager, hungry looks did the poor children cast on that piece of nice rich cake which the dog ate so lazily and with such indifference! Then Mrs. Melmoth advanced—timidly advanced, with her sickly babe in her arms—and besought the lady to give her a few pence for the love of God! But the old dame absolutely shrank in disgust to the very edge of the pavement; and turning round to the domestic, bade him hurry on, "lest the dog should catch vermin or some nasty disease from those filthy beggars!"

Such were her words; and yet the poor woman and her children were as cleanly as poverty would allow them to be—aye, and although they had neither shoes nor stockings on their feet!

And the wealthy dame, who expended gold upon her beloved dog, passed rapidly on—followed by her pampered menial;—and on arriving at the house whither she was proceeding to pay a morning visit, she launched forth in a pathetic strain upon the shocking increase of beggars!

Anon there came a Bishop down Whitehall. His Lordship was on foot that day, because he had lent one of his carriages to the mistress whom he pensioned magnificently, and another to a married daughter whose prostitution to a Minister had obtained the reverend old gentleman his see. With an air half-dignified and half-sanctimonious did the Bishop advance,—wearing that sort of humility which seems to say, "Look at my meekness!"—and with a bunch of gold seals dangling over his silk apron. Having bestowed a haughty bend of the head upon a poor curate who bowed to the earth as he passed by,—this same curate performing more duties in a week at the rate of forty pounds a-year than the Bishop had done in all his life,—his Lordship's eyes fell upon the poor family. Timidly and tearfully—dragging herself along with a painfulness that was as evident as the sun shining over-head—did Mrs. Melmoth accost the proud prelate. But

that man of God—that religious old Imposter who preached of Jesus riding on an ass and kept two carriages—that worldly hypocrite who denounced riches from the pulpit and received twenty thousand a-year from the labour, toil, and industry of the people—that hoary old sinner who voted for Sabbath-Bills while he kept a mistress and fattened upon the fruits of his daughter's adultery and shame,—this old Bishop it was who sternly bade the starving woman "go and work for her bread and not bring up her children in idleness!"

Then the man of God passed on his way, to lunch with another prelate and deplore the inefficiency of the laws to put down mendicants—nor trouble himself as to what the real meaning of the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus may be.

Presently there passed down Whitehall two young officers arm-in-arm, — two of those aristocratic jackanapes who den the red coat are they are well loosened from their titled mammas' apron-strings, and whose commissions in the army are procured *by purchase!* These lace-bedizened monkeys were smoking cigars—leering insolently at every pretty girl they met—fancying themselves irresistible in the trumpery gaud of their flaming apparel—and thinking it an excellent joke because they had been locked up all night in a watch-house for stealing knockers from front-doors. Humbly did the eldest boy of the starving family accost these gallant gentlemen who seemed to be laughing so good-humouredly: but the moment he dared to present the ragged and famished spectacle of his personal appearance to the noble notice of those lordlings, the one turned aside in disgust as if he sniffed the foul air of a pestilence, and the other looked anxiously round for a constable. In fine, they passed on without even throwing the poor boy a half-penny;—and within an hour they each lost a thousand pounds at cards and dice!

Soon afterwards the humble curate who saluted the Bishop with such profound respect and received so haughty an acknowledgment in return, — that same curate who preached three sermons every Sunday and attended to the duties of a large parish for forty pounds a-year,—returned slowly down Whitehall. He caught sight of the poor family — he paused and put his hand into his pocket. Heaven knows there was little enough *there;* and what there was he needed for his *own* poor family at home. But he drew forth a shilling;—and as a tear trembled upon the lash of the worthy man, he presented it to Mrs. Melmoth, saying in a tone tremulous with emotion, "My poor woman, I am sorry—very sorry that I can spare you no more. But——"

And, as his heart grew too full for farther utterance, the humble curate—the *real* minister of the lowly Jesus—hurried away to hide his feelings and escape the outpourings of gratitude which followed his sublime benevolence.

Then the Melmoth family broke their fast;—and the bread which the poor mother ate was moistened with her tears, as she contrasted in her mind the behaviour of the pompous Bishop and that of the hard-working, half-starved, and spirit-broken curate.

On returning to the station which she had chosen for her piteous pursuit in Whitehall, Mrs. Melmoth was speedily wrapt in a mournful reverie,—from which she was awakened by a private soldier who accosted her. He was a fine, tall, handsome fellow, whose noble form set off the uniform which he wore to far greater advantage than if it had been embellished by the insignia of an officer;—and his intellectual countenance, marked with an air of decision, contrasted strongly with the ignoble, dissipated, and effeminate looks of the two lordlings who had passed some hours previously. This private soldier—a man sprung from the common people, but one of nature's nobles—addressed Mrs. Melmoth in a kind manner; and, having uttered a few touching words of sympathy, he put in her hand all the money he possessed —a few halfpence—and walked rapidly away. Yet that man bore upon his back—beneath the King's uniform—the deep scars and the long wails indelibly imprinted on his flesh by the accursed cat-o'-nine-tails;—and he was likewise a marked man in his regiment, because he had been once caught reading a book written in praise of the French Revolution!

The curate's and the private soldier's money was all that the Melmoths obtained on the second day of their mendicant life;—and in the evening they returned to the low lodging-house where for a few pence they obtained shelter. The children soon slept: but the unhappy, almost heart-broken mother was some hours before she could close her eyes in slumber. And ere a feverish and uneasy rest came over her, she tried to pray—but she could not! No—she could not bring herself to pray: for she began to doubt the existence of a God. Never, never in all her life had she committed a deed of which she was ashamed: a good daughter had she been—a good wife and mother had she proved;—and wherefore, then, was she thus cruelly persecuted? Why was she doomed to behold her children less cared for by the world than a wretched poodle-dog?—wherefore was she so completely crushed, weighed down, and overpowered by an appalling sense of utter misery, that she wished herself dead—and already felt thoughts of suicide creeping into her brain, accompanied by terrible ideas of murder in respect to her children. No—she could not pray: she had no *hope* left—scarcely any *faith;*—and without faith in heaven, and hope that it will hear the proffered prayer, how could she force her lips to frame the pious intercession?

And even if she could have prayed, Oh! what a place was it to pray in! Within the four walls of a low room, blackened by smoke, and filled with an atmosphere that seemed stagnant in its pestilential density, were crowded together the vilest specimens of all vile characters and the most miserable of the immense brotherhood of wretchedness. While the candle was still burning the looks of licentious effrontery which the women wore and the ferocious aspect of the men filled Mrs. Melmoth with mingled disgust and alarm;—and when the light was extinguished, the ribald discourse that was still continued for some time, seemed to derive fresh horrors from the darkness. And then she pictured to herself that the time must come when her boys would grow up to be as ruffian-like as those men—and her daughters as shameless and abandoned as those women! Oh! how could prayers ascend from such a place to the throne of the Eternal?—how could human lips venture to offer up either thanksgivings or entreaties from such a polluted atmosphere?

On the morrow the mendicant family issued forth again—and on this day did they glean from the

hand of humble charity enough to purchase bread and pay for the next night's shelter. For the well-dressed and the rich bestowed little or nothing—but either turned away in disgust, or else talked of constables and the House of Correction.

Six or seven days more passed in the same manner;—and thus was it that the wretched mother and the hapless children sustained an existence which they could not value, and learnt those bitter lessons that constitute the experience acquired by poverty.

One night,—the same as that on which the masquerade took place at Covent Garden Theatre,—the poor woman and her children were huddled as usual in the corner of the room. The light was extinguished: but the air felt hot and sickly in that crowded place. Mrs. Melmoth's two boys and the girl were sleeping soundly; and the sickly babe was endeavouring to draw some sustenance from her withered bosom. She herself was lost in one of those deep desponding moods which are broken from time to time by pangs of poignant anguish shooting through the heart and brain, as lightning flashes athwart the murky night;—when her attention was slowly and as it were insensibly drawn to the conversation which was going on amongst several of the other lodgers in that room. In fact, she found herself listening almost before she spontaneously gave her attention to the discourse;—but its nature speedily rivetted her curiosity with its fearful and appalling interest.

"What is that you're saying, Job Minks?" asked a fellow, arousing from his slumbers and catching something which had been uttered by the individual thus addressed.

"Why, he was a-telling of us a story that he's invented his-self and that I don't believe for a minute," said another.

"But I tell you that it's true," exclaimed the man who answered to the euphonious name of Job Minks; "and I not only heard it from a pal of mine this morning, but I read it in the paper at the Beggars' Staff where I happened to be in the afternoon."

"Well, what is it?" demanded the fellow who had just walked up. "I heerd you a-saying something about tearing up bodies from their graves——"

"And so I did," interrupted Minks; "and once more I tell you it's true. For the last three or four nights there have been bodies torn up from their graves in the burying-grounds of different parts of London;—and the corpses have been found all rent limb from limb and horribly mutilated."

"But who the devil can amuse his-self in such a fashion?" demanded the man who had so recently awakened.

"Ah! that's more than I can tell you, Buss," answered Minks; "and the 'thorities would give their ears to find out. It seems that the first affair of the kind took place in Old St. Pancras churchyard four nights ago. When the sexton went to open the church in the morning for a weddin' that was to take place, to his horror and astonishment he saw a grave opened and the body lying on the top of the earth that had been thrown up. The corpse was that of an old gentleman who had been buried a few days before; and it was mutilated in a shocking manner. It was clear enough that the person who did all this must have had some implement to dig out the earth; for mutilation had been accomplished by a blunt instrument such as a spade."

"This is really dreadful," exclaimed Buss. "And yet I ain't a feller to be shocked at a trifle, neither."

It is almost needless to observe that Mrs. Melmoth shuddered with an indescribable horror throughout her entire being, as she listened to this appalling narrative. Her poverty—her misery—and even the wretchedness of her children were forgotten for the moment in the fearful interest which absorbed all her faculties and sensations;—and the perspiration stood in large drops upon her brow. The hideous nature of the narrative acquired a deeper and more tremendous interest from the fact that it was told in the midst of a profound darkness, and in a place thronged with characters of the vilest and most polluted description. In a word, the effect produced upon her was as if a loathsome snake were slowly coiling itself around her person, enveloping her closer and closer in its slimy folds and exhaling its pestilential breath in her face, while every moment she expected its head would come in cold and clammy contact with her cheek. Such was the revolting sensation excited by the scarcely credible tale that the man was recounting.

"Dreadful, indeed!" he exclaimed, in ejaculatory echo of the remark made by his friend Buss. "There never was such a thing known before: at least so the papers say. For, mark you—this is no affair in which resurrection-men are engaged—nor yet robbers. Body-snatchers don't leave the corpse behind them;—and the day's gone by when people were buried with rings on their fingers. So it ain't for the anatomy-shops that it's done; neither is it thieves that do it."

"Then what can it be for?" demanded Buss.

"Ah! that's more than I can tell you," responded Job Minks. "The second affair took place in Shoreditch churchyard; and the third it St. Matthew's, Bethnal Green. In this last place, two bodies were found torn up out of their graves—horribly mutilated, and with the winding-sheets rent to shreds. There's quite a panic in all those neighbourhoods, I can tell you."

"No wonder," observed Buss.

"But what are the 'thorities going to do?" asked another listener.

"What can they do, but fill the burying-grounds with man-traps and spring-guns and set a watch at night," exclaimed Job Minks. "The papers say that this has been done in most of the churchyards in London and the suburbs; and so the chap, whoever he is, will be pretty sure to be caught. The resurrectionists, too, must take care of themselves now," added Minks; "or they'll be getting riddled with bullets or have their legs caught in a trap. In Old St. Pancras there's a watch set with blood-hounds."

"And this is really true—and no larking, Job?" said Buss, still incredulous.

"Well—all I can say is that a pal of mine told me of it first," was the answer; "and then I read all about it in a newspaper that Carrotty Poll lent me at the Staff in Horsydown."

"Them's your vouchers, eh?" observed Buss. "Well, I don't say that I shan't believe it: but I must confess it's precious startling. Your pal might have have read it also—and we know the papers tell the most infernal lies sometimes."

"So they do," exclaimed Job Minks: "but let me tell you that my pal didn't read it at all, for the plain and simple reason that he can't read. Neither did he have it read to him; but it was the sexton of Old St. Pancras which told him all about it—seeing that he went to bury his sister there yesterday morning."

"Ah! that's different," observed Buss. "But I s'pose it's some Bedlamite that's broke loose and is amusing his-self in this uncommon style?"

"Or else it must be a cannibal," suggested another listener.

"Or p'r'aps some desperate wretch driven by sheer starvation to dig up dead bodies and eat them," remarked a third.

"It may be a madman—but it is not a cannibal," said Minks: "for it don't appear that he has made a meal on the corpses. His delight seems to be to hack and hew them to pieces; and in all this there's what the papers call a fiendish revelry in the horrible pastime of exhuming and mutilating the dead."

"Shall I tell you what *I* think of the matter?" exclaimed a voice which Mrs. Melmoth did not remember to have heard previously joining in the conversation.

"Is that you, old Tiddleywink?" demanded Buss. "Why, I thought you was fast asleep long ago. I heerd you a-snoring."

"No, you didn't—it was somebody else," was the reply. "I've been listening all along to every word our friend Minks has been telling us—and what is more, I believe every word too. For the whole thing puts me in mind of certain accounts that I have read in books; and you'll find out in the long run that the hands which are now exhuming bodies and mutilating them so horribly, are not those of a madman—nor yet of a cannibal—nor yet of a desperate wretch goaded on by starvation."

These remarks were made with a solemnity and an emphasis which produced a strange and awe-inspiring effect upon all who heard them; and a deep silence of more than a minute ensued. That silence, following so closely upon the hideous narrative which had just been related, had in it something of a tomb-like horror and a sepulchral gloom—especially when the idea was associated with that of the pitchy darkness which prevailed in the chamber.

Mrs. Melmoth felt her blood curdling in her veins; and as she pressed the now sleeping babe more closely to her bosom, she shrank up as it were within herself, as if she fancied that the cold hand of a corpse was about to clutch her by the shoulder.

"And so them's your opinions, old Tiddleywink—be they?" exclaimed Buss, at length breaking silence. "But I s'pose, since you speak with such a air of authority, you can ventur' a guess as to who or what it is that has been playing such precious pranks with the dead 'uns?"

"Well—I *have* an opinion on that point," said the individual thus appealed to; "and you may depend upon it that the result will show I hav'n't been far wrong. For, according to what I've read in books—and you must remember I was a schoolmaster once, before the tyranny of the parson of the parish ruined me and I was driven out into the streets to become, *first* a beggar—and *then* a member of that class of people who find things before they are lost——"

"A wery délicate way of expressin' the noble perfession of prig and buzgloak," interjected the man who rejoiced in the name of Buss.

"Come—don't stop him with observations in that manner," cried Job Minks. "What was you going to say, old feller?"

"Simply *this*," was the response; "that according to what I've read in books, it is not by any means the first or the twentieth time that instances have occurred of graves being opened—bodies dragged forth—and horrible mutilations accomplished. In England, perhaps, the thing is rare: but on the continent it has been frequent enough. And the perpetrator of these atrocities is not a resurrectionist—nor a thief—nor a madman—nor a cannibal—nor a starving wretch made desperate by hunger: no—it is nothing of all these, I can assure you!"

"Then what is it?" demanded several voices, with that shuddering accent which denotes a presentiment of some appalling reply to the question put.

"What is it?" repeated the ex-schoolmaster, in a tone of mingled horror and solemnity: "it is a being of whom you have all doubtless heard, but whose existence may have seemed fabulous—a being whose very name is sufficient to make the blood run cold and the hair stand on end!"

"But this being—what is it?" again cried many voices.

"A Vampyre!" was the astounding answer.

Ejaculations of horror followed this announcement; and Mrs. Melmoth felt a sensation come over her as if she were about to faint.

"Yes—the perpetrator of those atrocities which you have heard related this night," continued the ex-schoolmaster, "must be none other than a Vampyre. And now that you know there is a Vampyre in London, I warn you to take care of yourselves—how you pass through churchyards by night—how you trust yourselves in lonely places near suburban cemeteries—aye, and how you sleep in dark rooms without knowing who are your companions and who may happen to be huddled up alongside of you!"

"Good God! is there any danger of such a thing?" exclaimed Buss, starting up from the wretched flock mattress on which he was stretched.

"Danger!" repeated the ex-schoolmaster, in a tone of mingled irony and terror: "to be sure there is! Can you doubt it? Do you know—or do you not know of what a Vampyre is capable? Well—I will explain it to you. He will insinuate himself into a company such as our's now present—he will sit down and converse in the most agreeable manner—he will hire a lodging for the night in the same room,——for example, in such a place as this,——and he will stretch himself down on his mattress like all the rest of us. Then, when the light is put out and everybody else is sleeping, this Vampyre will either strangle some unfortunate wretch at once, or else will fasten his teeth upon his flesh while still living and begin to drink his blood! This is what a Vampyre will do: and now I should like to know whether people of our stamp, who are forced to frequent these kind of places, should be cautious or not?"

Renewed ejaculations of horror burst from those on whose ears this fearful description and awful warning fell;—and Mrs. Melmoth, though a woman of good sterling common sense, felt herself overwhelmed with terrors which in the broad sun-light and the open air would not have exercised even a moment's influence upon her. But in the midst of that deep darkness—in the society of wretches of the lowest and most depraved character—and with her

mind previously attenuated by her own harrowing thoughts and desponding reflections, she naturally became an easy prey to the dominion of that horrible superstitious alarm which seized upon all the rest.

"By God!" exclaimed Buss, "I would sooner walk about the streets all night than run the risk of encountering the Vampyre in a lodging-house."

While he was yet speaking, the door of the room was opened; and some one entered.

"Vampyre!" cried the new-comer, closing the door behind him—and it was the voice of a man that thus spoke: "who the devil is talking of Vampyres?—and what do you know of them?"

But at that same instant an ejaculation burst from the lips of some female in the room;—and then all was still.

"What was that?" said Job Minks, after a pause, during which the silence of the tomb had prevailed.

"It was some woman frightened by old Tiddley-wink's description of the Vampyre," observed one of the occupants of the chamber.

"Well, it struck me to be rather a cry of joy at something or another," said the ex-schoolmaster: "though what anybody could have to rejoice at in such a place and at this hour, I cannot well understand. But who is the new-comer? Let him announce himself in a proper manner: for it has become necessary to take all kinds of precautions in respect to strangers."

"Well," said the voice of the individual who had just entered; "you may call me Toby Firebrand—for that's the name I'm known by amongst my pals. But how the devil am I to grope my way to a mattress?"

"There's none in this part of the room," said Buss.

"Nor yet here," added Job Minks.

"And there isn't a hair's-breadth of space to spare in this corner," exclaimed the ex-schoolmaster.

"Ah! I suppose you take me for the Vampyre you were all talking about when I entered the chamber a minute ago?" said the new-comer, with a mocking laugh. "But what made the old landlady assure me that there was plenty of room in this chamber? I'll go and make her refund me my halfpence and then take myself off to another place. So good night to ye all!"

And with these words the individual who had announced himself as Toby Firebrand, took his departure, slamming the door behind him.

The noise recalled Mrs. Melmoth to her senses: for she it was who had given utterance to that ejaculation which followed the entrance of Toby Firebrand—and she had fainted immediately afterwards.

Collecting her scattered ideas as well as she was able, she strove to ascertain whether a certain impression which was uppermost in her mind was a feature in a troubled dream or a fact which had really occurred.

"That voice—surely it was Melmoth's!" she said to herself a hundred times in a minute: and then, as the whole conversation which she had overheard respecting the Vampyre came back to her memory, the very words which Toby Firebrand had uttered likewise flashed to her recollection.

"*Vampyre!—who the devil is talking of Vampyres?—and what do you know of them?*"

Yes—these were the words he had spoken;—and if she could thus recall them so accurately to her mind, and if they so closely connected themselves with the previous conversation, she felt tolerably well assured that the impression left upon her brain was no delusion.

And this impression was that the new-comer was none other than her husband—that husband who had been so ruthlessly torn from her by the despotic authority of the Home Office, and whose she supposed to be far away! Oh! if it were indeed he—if it were really his voice which she had heard, and which had suddenly sounded like welcome music to her ear through the deep darkness of the night and the hot atmosphere of that miserable chamber,—if, in fine, the father of her mendicant children was actually restored to her, and was there—in that very room—perhaps close by her side—at all events not many feet distant from the corner where she lay crouched up,—oh! if this were indeed the case, what happiness now awaited her!

So powerfully wrought were her feelings as these thoughts traversed her mind, that she could not immediately give utterance to the question which her lips nevertheless strove hard to breathe. For she knew not that during the brief interval of her unconsciousness, the man whose voice elicited that ejaculation of joy from her tongue, had taken his departure to seek some other lodging for the night.

"Melmoth?—does any one answer to the name of Melmoth?" she at length inquired, in a faltering tone and with deep suspense at the heart.

But no one replied to the query.

"Who are you asking for, my good woman?" said the ex-schoolmaster, after a long pause. "There doesn't appear to be any person of such a name in the place."

"But that man—who came in just now—at the moment when you were all discoursing on a frightful topic?" observed Mrs. Melmoth, in a half-stifling voice and with great palpitations of the heart.

"Oh! he went away immediately again," returned the ex-schoolmaster. "He said his name was Toby Firebrand—and as there wasn't room for him in this place, he took his departure."

Mrs. Melmoth said nothing more: her feelings were suffocating—for scarcely had a gleam of hope flashed athwart the gloom of her prospects, when it disappeared in an instant. But at the next moment she was composed, and indeed cheered by the remembrance that her husband was at all events in London: for that it was *his* voice which she had heard, she felt convinced.

Not once did she close her eyes in slumber that night;—and so soon as the first solitary and wintry dawn glimmering of day stole into the chamber, she aroused her children from their sleep. Then in their ears did she whisper the glad tidings that their father was returned and that they might hope to see him soon;—and it was therefore with lighter hearts than usual that they all sallied forth from the low lodging-house to wander about the metropolis in search of a husband and a parent.

CHAPTER CLII.

THE MILLINER AND THE HANDSOME FOOTMAN.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon of the day following the masquerade; and Mrs. Brace was seated alone in her parlour, pondering upon the various difficulties which surrounded her.

In the first place there was Mobbs, who would evidently become a rapacious extortioner: then there was Frederick Dray, who had already darted amorous glances upon her, and had lost all the respect with which he had formerly been wont to treat her;—next there was Harriet, who, although faithful and devoted, must nevertheless be provided for;—and lastly, there was the chance of some unlucky or providential circumstance transpiring to afford a trace to the murder of the head constable of Bow Street. In fact, the wretched milliner not only found herself completely in the power of three persons who would look to her purse as a constant means for supplying all their wants; but she likewise felt that she should ever be exposed to the insolence of Mobbs, the arrogance of the footman, and the pretensions of the lady's-maid.

Mobbs was to return in the evening. What would he require of her?—and how should she act? Frederick Dray's murderous intention of the preceding night had been defeated in the manner already described: and Mrs. Brace knew not whether the footman still entertained the same project. She shuddered when she thought that he possibly might;—and yet there was a secret hope at the bottom of her soul that he had *not* abandoned the idea of assassination. For if Mobbs were put out of the way, the most brutal of the three depositors of her secret would be removed from her path;—and *then*——Oh! did not the thought steal into the mind of the wretched woman that she might perhaps find means to silence Frederick Dray *likewise* for ever!

So true is the saying that one crime needs a dozen others to conceal it!

Then again,—if once those two depositors of her secret were thus removed,—might she not dispose of her establishment—realise her property—and repair to America? Harriet was no particular object of alarm, and might accompany her. Yes—this was an excellent plan;—and the milliner even found heart enough to smile as it slowly developed itself in her thoughts.

She was in the midst of this reverie, when the door opened and Frederick Dray entered the room.

His countenance wore a sinister expression which instantly produced a disagreeable effect upon Mrs. Brace and caused a sensation of uneasiness to creep over her. She half started from her chair—then sank back into it: and, fixing her eyes intently upon the man's features, she endeavoured to read all that was passing in his mind.

"Madam, are we not to have a few minutes' conversation together?" he said, lounging negligently against the high back of an arm-chair: "for I think I understood from you that the scoundrel Mobbs is to return to-night."

"Yes—he will return," answered Mrs. Brace; "and—as you say, Frederick——we—we—must deliberate——"

"Don't labour under any embarrassment with me, my dear madam," interrupted the footman: "henceforth we must row in the same boat, if we wish to save our necks from a halter."

And, without any farther ceremony, he deposited himself quietly and comfortably in the arm-chair opposite to the one occupied by his mistress;—and leaning back, he stretched out his legs towards the fire just for all the world as if he were the master of the house.

"You have some plan in your head, then, Frederick?" observed Mrs. Brace, not daring to remonstrate with him for his impertinence.

"Plan!—egad, I've got it all cut and dried, my dear madam," returned the footman, in a flippant, self-sufficient, off-hand manner;—"and I hope that it will suit you in all its details."

"Proceed," said the milliner, already suspecting that Dray was revolving in his mind something more than even the murder of Mobbs, and that he had ulterior views beyond the mere disposal of the ex-constable.

"In the first place, my dear lady," continued Frederick, in a tone of familiarity, "let us thoroughly understand the point from which we are to start. In plain terms, then," he added, fixing his eyes keenly upon her countenance,—"Peter Grumley did *not* die of apoplexy—but you murdered him!"

"You dare not thus accuse me!" exclaimed the milliner, in a hoarse choking voice—while her magnificent bust heaved and fell with a long convulsive movement.

"What is the use of entertaining me with such language as that?" demanded Dray, his whole manner denoting an insolent confidence. "Did you not ask me last night whether *this additional crime* was necessary? But that admission on your part only confirmed the suspicions that already dwelt in my mind. Besides, did you not lend yourself to my plan to make away with Mobbs?—and if you had not previously done a trifle in the murder way, would you have fallen so easily into the latter scheme? But what difference does it make, after all? The corpse lies buried in *this* house—and, if discovered, will be enough to get us all hanged."

"What, then, do you propose?" asked Mrs. Brace, no longer daring to dispute with the footman relative to the mode in which Grumley met his death.

"I propose to let Mobbs follow his superior officer," responded Dray, with a significant smile. "And now you see how much I am risking on your account, my dear lady: for nothing would be easier than for me to take myself off to America and leave you to deal with this Mobbs as best you may. But as I am confident he is not to be trusted—but will either betray the secret in a drunken moment, or else out of revenge the very first time you refuse to satisfy his extortionate demands—I therefore propose to put him out of your way altogether."

"And how—that is—by what plan——" faltered Mrs. Brace, in a low thick tone.

"Not in a way that will shed blood and leave traces upon the floor," answered the footman. "Whatever we do, must be done safely. I suppose you poisoned Peter Grumley? Well—an excellent method too. Nothing more useful than a few drops of Prussic acid to have in one's house. Ah! I see by your manner, then, that Prussic acid it was. But I am afraid that Mobbs may smell a rat. He will be suspicious—upon his guard; and depend upon it

he won't drink at your house again—or if he does, it will only be what he sees you drink likewise—aye, and *first* also. However—an idea strikes me! Do you think he will want to go down into the back kitchen again?"

"It is impossible for me to say," replied the milliner. "But, doubtless—if you particularly wished—I could entice him thither—upon some pretence——"

"Be it so—and leave all the rest to me!" exclaimed Frederick. "He shall be made away with as assuredly as his name is Mobbs—and when he lies under the stone along with Peter Grumley, I will guarantee that not a trace of the deed shall be left behind. And now, my dear Mrs. Brace, with your leave I will take a glass of your excellent champagne, just to put me into spirits to unfold the rest of my plans."

The milliner rose mechanically from her seat—opened a cupboard—brought forth the wine—drew the cork—and filled a glass for Frederick Dray, as he reclined in lolling indolence in the arm-chair. Yes—the mistress waited upon the domestic;—and the elegant, fashionable milliner of Pall Mall—the friend of the Prince of Wales and the depositress of many a noble lady's secrets and many an aristocratic frailty—was now in servile attendance upon her own lacquey!

"You are as amiable and captivating in manners as you are agreeable in person," said he, as he looked amorously over the glass which he was raising to his lips.

Mrs. Brace now awoke as it were from a dream: or rather, her mind shook off the numbness which had crept upon it while the footman was detailing with such cold-blooded calmness his designs relative to Mobbs. She then perceived the immense error she had committed in so far compromising her dignity as to obey the man's commands relative to the wine, instead of at once taking a proper stand and assuming a decided attitude to convince him that there were certain limits beyond which he must not pass in his bearing towards her, no matter how grave were the interests that linked them. But, by at once succumbing to his arrogance, she had suffered him to gain a tremendous advantage over her; and it was now no easy task to regain the ground which she had lost.

"Have the kindness to proceed with whatever you may have to say to me, Frederick," she observed at length: "for should any one come in, the familiar manner which you have assumed towards me would excite the strangest suspicions."

"Familiar manner, indeed!" echoed Dray, in an offended tone. "Well—upon my word, that is rather an assumption on your part. Am I not about to commit a crime and endanger my safety in this world and my salvation in the next, entirely on your account? And do you think that I anticipate no reward? As a matter of course. Such a deed is worth its price; and that price must be paid to me."

"What recompense is it that you claim?" asked the milliner.

"Your hand, my dear—your hand in honourable marriage," replied Dray, sipping his champagne with a *nonchalant* ease and stretching out his legs with the air of a Home Secretary when giving a refusal to a deputation imploring that the life of some convict may be spared

"Marriage!" echoed Mrs. Brace, in mingled anger and amazement: but instantly recollecting herself, she said, "Surely you are not in earnest, Frederick? I thought you intended to marry Harriet."

"Harriet was all very well a little while ago, my dear lady," returned the man, with a supercilious air and an affected drawl: "but circumstances have transpired, you understand, to enable me to look to a more elevated position. You are a handsome woman—a very handsome woman; and I shall be proud of you as a wife. I am not particularly ill-favoured; and you need not be ashamed of me as a husband."

"But remember that I am older than you, Frederick—some years older," said Mrs. Brace, making a feint to contest a point which she was prepared to yield eventually—but only because she was now more than ever determined to rid herself of this importunate accomplice so soon as an opportunity should serve.

"Well—you may be a little older, my dear," observed Dray, growing more familiar alike in his manner and his language: "but you are a splendid creature—and I long to pillow my head on that superb bosom which now sinks and rises so gently. Ah! often when I have stood behind your chair at dinner or supper-time, and looked over your shoulders to catch a glimpse of that bosom, I have thought to myself how happy should I be if you would only take a fancy to me. Then, when I have looked into your fine eyes, and beheld your beautiful white teeth shining between your moist red lips, I have felt such strange sensations come over me that I have more than once resolved to steal to your chamber in the middle of the night and either persuade or force you to submit to my wishes. And now at last—at last," continued Dray, his imagination heated with the wine which he was drinking and to which he was so utterly unaccustomed,—"at last I stand upon the threshold of that gratification which I have so often and so deeply coveted. Ah! my dearest creature, you are indeed worthy that I should commit a crime to serve you—even though that crime be murder: but, on the other hand, you will not say that I am unworthy of an adequate reward?"

"No—I will not prove ungrateful to you, Frederick," answered Mrs. Brace, assuming a tender tone and fixing upon him an amorous look: though, notwithstanding the ardour of her lascivious nature, and despite of the fact that Dray was really a handsome young man, she experienced not the slightest inclination nor the faintest sensual impulse in his favour.

"Then you will consent to become my wife, dear Fanny?" said the man;—and, placing the glass upon the table, he rose from his seat—approached the milliner—threw his arms about her neck—and fastened his lips greedily to her own.

"You naughty fellow, be quiet," said Mrs. Brace, gently repulsing him. "Let us do all that we have agreed upon—and then we shall have leisure and opportunity to talk of love. Come—finish your champagne and retire: because I have several matters to attend to. And, by the bye, you will not say a word to Harriet at present——"

"No—it is not worth while," remarked Frederick. "And yet the sooner I put the poor girl out of suspense, the better: for to tell you the real truth, she is in a certain way——"

"Ah! I suspected as much!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace. "Now really, Frederick, this is not generous on your part——"

"It may be ungenerous," he interrupted, surveying himself in the mirror over the mantel and caressing his whiskers: "but it would be far more stupid on my part to go and marry a low servant-girl who will present me with a child five months after our union, to the infinite amusement of all my waggish friends and joke-loving acquaintances."

"She is a genteel girl—and a pretty one," observed Mrs. Brace. "There is nothing low about her;—and as for the other matter—why, it is easily alleged that you had been privately married for the last six months."

"The thing won't do, my dear—'pon my soul, it won't!" said Dray. "I couldn't fling myself away in that unconscionable manner;—nor can I afford to lose such a dear, handsome, voluptuous creature as you are. No—what you and I have already settled is a bargain; and you must leave me to manage Harriet. So no more remonstrances upon that head And now, what time is Mobbs to be here this evening?"

"He did not say," replied Mrs. Brace: "but I suppose that he will make his appearance soon after ten."

"Very well," exclaimed the footman. "Then you will entice him down into the back kitchen at about eleven—and not before. I shall be there—or else concealed close by. Don't ask me any questions now; for I have my plan ready cut and dried in my head—and I'll be bound to execute it properly. Of course you will take care to have all the servants in bed by half-past ten o'clock—except the chambermaid and the hall-porter belonging to the other house; and they won't be near to interfere with us. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly," was the response.

"Then one kiss more, love," said Dray; "and

I will leave you for the present to attend to your own affairs."

The milliner resigned her lips to the pressure of his own;—and the self-sufficient footman then withdrew.

CHAPTER CLIII.

MOBBS AND HIS DOG AGAIN.

THE clocks at the West End were chiming the half-hour after ten at night, when Mr. Mobbs was ushered by Frederick Dray into the parlour where Mrs. Brace was awaiting his arrival.

The footman retired immediately: but ere he closed the door, he darted a keen, rapid, and significant glance at the milliner, to assure her that he had in no wise changed his mind in respect to the matter agreed upon between them.

Mobbs was followed by his dog, which he kicked savagely under a sofa, while he deposited himself in the same arm-chair that the footman had occupied with so much indolence a few hours previously;—and, dropping his hat upon the carpet, he said, "Our business was interrupted in a queer manner last night, ma'am."

"Yes—and before you had stipulated the price of your secrecy in a certain affair, Mr. Mobbs," returned the milliner. "But the night is cold again: will you not take something to warm you?"

"Perhaps you'll have the kindness to tell me, ma'am, in the fust instance," said Mobbs, fixing his looks searchingly upon Mrs. Brace, "how my pal and superior, Peter Grumley, came by his death? I mean, in what way you did the job?"

"Is it necessary to revert to all those horrors?" exclaimed the milliner. "Surely—surely, enough has already been said upon that most afflicting subject?"

"I told you last night that I must know all—and that I would then make terms with you," said Mobbs, in a dogged tone of determination. "Give me every explanation: 'cause it's natural that I should want to learn all the particklers connected with a matter that has deprived me of so good a friend. Come, ma'am—I don't suppose you did it without assistance: at all events, if you made away with him by your own hand alone, you could not have buried him beneath that there stone in the back kitchen, unless you had help. So you see that you've a good deal yet to tell me."

"But if you are really inclined to make terms with me," said Mrs. Brace, now alarmed lest the man suspected her murderous designs towards himself and was laying some trap to ensnare her beforehand,—"of what earthly use is it to you to ascertain all those particulars."

"Don't be afeard of anything wrong, my dear lady," replied Mobbs. "I haven't the least intention to harm you or your accomplices, provided you deal fairly, frankly, and openly with me. But I would have you to know that I can see as far into a brick wall as most people;—and I am therefore not blind to the fact that you *must* have had at least one confederate in the deed—or else in the concealment of the body."

"And if this were true?" said Mrs. Brace, trembling all over.

"Then I must be paid for keeping a secret that would hang *two* persons," replied Mobbs. "Now do you understand me?"

"Perfectly," answered the milliner, breathing more freely.

"And I must know the name of your accomplice—who he is—where he lives—and all about him," proceeded Mobbs: "because—to speak plainly at once—I must have a handsome annuity from both of you."

"And suppose that I did the deed by myself—totally unassisted and alone?" said Mrs. Brace interrogatively.

"Very likely you did," returned Mobbs, laconically. "In fact, I should think it most probable that you pisoned him: and—no offence, ma'am—but that's precisely the reason why *I* should rayther decline taking anything either short or warm, unless it was a sip out of a glass which you'd tasted fust."

"Good God! Mr. Mobbs," exclaimed the milliner, with well affected horror and indignation; "you do not—you cannot suppose for a moment that I am capable of doing you a mischief—you who have behaved so kindly towards me?"

"Well, I don't say that you *would*, ma'am," observed the ex-constable: "but at the same time I can't say that you *wouldn't*. Howsomever, we won't dwell upon that pint. You admit, then,—or I'll take it for granted—that you pisoned poor Grumley in a glass of liquor or what not? Well—but you couldn't raise a stone—dig a grave—put in the corpse—fill up the hole—replace the stone—and dispose of the extra soil,—you couldn't do all this, I say, without assistance: and therefore I want to know who *did* assist you."

"Mr. Mobbs, I will not deceive you any longer," said Mrs. Brace, affecting the mingled confusion and frankness of one who has been playing a game of duplicity but is now determined to act with candour and sincerity. "The fact is that your late master has not as yet been buried at all; and for the simple reason that I have not dared to make any one a confidant in this dreadful business."

"Then where is the corpse?" demanded Mobbs roughly.

"In a place adjoining that very kitchen to which I conducted you last night," returned the milliner. "Oh! if you would only assist me to dispose of the body!" she exclaimed, in a well-assumed paroxysm of anguish, clasping her hands with apparent earnestness at the same time.

"Well—I dare say we can manage this business," said Mobbs. "But how came you to deceive me so grossly and so uselessly?"

"I will deal honestly with you *now*, at all events," replied the milliner. "The truth is that I hoped to be able to get rid of the corpse in some way or another—either by burning it—or else nerving myself with sufficient courage to take some one into my confidence. Then, had you ever turned round upon me and proclaimed that the corpse of a murdered man lay beneath the pavement of the back kitchen, the result of a search would have refuted your evidence and indeed stamped it with falsehood. These were my motives for misleading you, Mr. Mobbs: but I hope you will pardon me."

"Well, well," said the man, altogether deluded by the apparent contrition which marked the manner of Mrs. Brace, and by the air of sincerity with

which she spoke: "it is useless to blame you—cause that won't mend matters. So, after all, you had no accomplice whatsomever?"

"Not any," replied Mrs. Brace.

"And the corpse still remains above ground?" added Mobbs, inquiringly.

"Yes—in a small dark place adjoining the back kitchen, and of which I have got the key," was the answer.

"Now, should you think a thousand pounds too much to give me for helping you to get rid of the corpse and for keeping your secret ever afterwards?" demanded the ex-constable, fixing his eyes keenly upon the milliner's countenance.

"A thousand pounds!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, affecting surprise at this specimen of exorbitance. "Oh! Mr. Mobbs, where do you think I am to get such a sum all in a moment?"

"Well—I don't require it all down upon the nail," observed the man: "but half now, and half in a fortnit."

"I suppose that you must have your own way—I am completely in your power—completely!" said the milliner, in a tone of lamentation. "But you will first help me to dispose of the body?"

"Oh! that's a part of the bargain," replied Mobbs. "And what you said to deceive me, shall now be done in earnest. I mean that we'll bury the corpse under the stones in the back kitchen—unless you've any better plan in view."

"No—I can suggest nothing better," returned the milliner: then, glancing at the time-piece on the mantel, she said, "It is now eleven o'clock, and all the servants have no doubt retired to their rooms."

"Well and good," observed Mobbs, rising from his seat: "we'll go and do our work at once—and then you shall hand me over the shiners."

Mrs. Brace took up a candle and led the way down to the back kitchen, followed by Mobbs at whose heels the dog trotted along. All was still—all was silent, in the lower region of the establishment; and the place was lighted only by the candle which the milliner carried in her hand.

On reaching the back kitchen, she cast her eyes hurriedly around: but Frederick Dray was not there. For an instant she was confounded: but the next moment recovering her presence of mind, she recollected he had said that if he were not in the place itself, he should be close by. And at the same time that this reflection flashed to her brain, she observed that a rope had been passed through a hook in the ceiling, and that one end was fastened to a nail in the upright plank supporting a row of shelves.

The dog began smelling round the stone, as on the former occasion; and Mobbs, struck by this circumstance, remarked that "it was singular the beast should get upon such a false scent." Then, as he caught a glimpse of some peculiarity about the mortar which fixed the stone in its setting, he stooped down and touched it with his finger.

At the same instant a side-door, communicating with a closet used to hold fire-wood, was dashed open,—and Frederick Dray, springing forth, threw himself with all his power upon the ex-constable.

"At him, Toby!" thundered the man, as he struggled desperately beneath the strong and vigorous Dray: but the dog only drew back into a corner, and growled with a low, savage, menacing, and continuous sound, as if on the point of flying at the assailant of his master.

But all that now took place was the work of a few moments—the terrible work of a wondrously short space, considering the tremendous magnitude of the deed.

For Mrs. Brace, with extraordinary presence of mind, hastened to succour the murderous proceeding of her domestic. Depositing the candle upon the dresser, she unfastened the rope from the nail, so that it ran through the hook in the ceiling, and the other end, which was formed into a noose, hung down within reach of Frederick Dray.

Meantime this desperate man had succeeded in keeping Mobbs down upon the pavement of the kitchen; and grasping his victim's head with both his hands, he raised it a little and then dashed it down with such savage violence upon the stones as to produce a stunning effect. Then, snatching at the noose, he slipped it over the ex-constable's head and, instantaneously drawing it tight about his neck, sprang to his feet. At the same moment new life appeared to animate Mobbs; and likewise raising himself up before Dray could possibly prevent him, he struggled to release his neck from the rope.

But the murderer snatched the cord from Mrs. Brace and pulled it tight—retreating at the same time to a distance from the spot where the victim was writhing, and plunging, and struggling desperately: while the milliner, getting behind the miserable ex-constable, caught hold of his arms and pinioned him.

The distortions of the man's countenance were horrible: but not a cry escaped him—not a word could he utter. The noose was strangling him: and while the foam came from his lips—the tongue lolled out—and the eyes were starting from his head, the murderer pulled him up till his head came in violent contact with the hook through which the halter ran.

Awful were the writhings of the strangling wretch, as he raised the arms on which Mrs. Brace had been compelled to abandon her hold;—and frightful were the workings of the countenance that was now livid, swollen, and marked with veins that seemed like knotted cords beneath the skin. But in a few moments his arms dropped by his side—the convulsions of his body and the drawing up of his legs rapidly lost their spasmodic violence—and, after a long quivering of the entire frame and a nervous working of the fingers, all motion ceased!

But while this hideous tragedy was in progress, the dog had emerged from the corner; and, when his master was hoisted into the air, the animal leapt up at him to lick his hand—a moaning noise now superseding the continuous growl of menace which its mouth had previously sent forth.

When, however, the poor beast saw that Mobbs had become motionless and was dangling to the ceiling like a bundle of clothes, an instinctive feeling seemed to make the dog aware that it's master was dead; and sneaking into the remotest, darkest corner, it began to whine in a piteous manner.

"For heaven's sake, silence that brute, Frederick!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, who was trembling all over and the ghastly pallor of whose countenance appeared through the vermeil tint which art had shed upon her cheeks. "It will alarm the house."

The footman seized the poker and advanced towards the dog: but the beast, apparently comprehending his hostile intention, rushed past him and sprang up the stairs.

"I will go and let the animal out," said Frederick, taking up the candle.

"My God! do not leave me here all alone—and in the dark!" cried Mrs. Brace, with imploring voice and manner: and she hurried after the footman, pursued by an appalling terror lest the dead man should descend from his halter and creep stealthily behind her.

On reaching the summit of the kitchen stairs she paused and clung to the railings for support,—a complete consternation now overpowering her and making her feel as if she were walking in a dream. For all the horrors of that most horrible drama in which she had just played so prominent a part, appeared suddenly to accumulate upon her head,—concentrating all their fury—all their intensity—all their direst, deepest, most penetrating influence, in order the more thoroughly to harrow up her soul and wring her breast with ineffable tortures. Her brain was on fire—barbed arrows were inflicting their agonies upon her heart—every nerve, fibre, and tendon was strung to a degree of tension producing an effect as if the chords which bound her to existence were all scorching in flames and would part, snap, and shrivel up in an instant!

Meantime Frederick Dray had been looking about in the passage and the hall in search of the dog: but the animal was nowhere to be found. He went into the neighbouring rooms the doors of which stood open: he looked under all the furniture and behind the curtains;—but all in vain. The mongrel was not there;—and, muttering an imprecation against the dog, the footman returned to his mistress, whom he found in a most deplorable condition. She had sunk upon the top stair of the kitchen flight, and was cowering down in a bent position with her hands upon her knees and her eyes glaring wildly. But the moment the light which Dray carried in his hand illumined the darkness again, and when she found that her companion in crime was once more by her side, she recovered herself somewhat.

But Dray, perceiving how strong a hold her terrors had gained upon her, and how speedily all their influence would be revived by even the most trifling cause, concealed from her the fact that he had not found the dog;—and in answer to a question concerning the brute, he at once assured her that he had put it out of the house.

Catching some portion of the desperate energy and cold-blooded hardihood which inspired that bold bad man, she raised herself up from the stair and begged him to lead the way to her own parlour that she might procure some brandy. This was done;—and she now felt equal to assist in the work which was yet to be performed.

Descending once more to the back kitchen, the murderer and murderess commenced the remaining act of their appalling drama. First they lowered the corpse: then Frederick Dray set to work to raise the stone which covered the remains of Peter Grumley. The shovelling out of the earth was accomplished far more easily than on the previous occasion, inasmuch as it was comparatively soft from that recent disturbance of its solid mass: and in about an hour's time the livid corpse of Grumley was exposed to view.

Mrs. Brace threw a shuddering glance into the grave—then turned away sick at heart and sick at soul;—sick at heart with a sense of loathsome disgust—sick at soul through reviving horror at the tremendous turpitude of which she had been guilty!

And now the corpse of Mobbs was tossed into the hole;—and Frederick Dray shovelled back the soil with a vigorous arm. In another hour that portion of the task was accomplished: the superfluous earth was then disposed of as on the previous occasion—the stone was restored to its setting in a like manner—and all was accomplished!

And now the murderer and the murderess looked each other in the face for almost the first time during upwards of two hours; and while Dray fixed his looks with gloating sensuousness upon the milliner, the latter gazed upon him with a wild and vacant curiosity as if to satisfy herself that all which had just passed was otherwise than a dream and that his presence *there* was a proof of the deed in which he had played so important a part.

Then, as he slowly led her away from the kitchen, that man of indomitable hardihood whispered in her ears his intention to pass the remainder of the night in her company: and, although at the first intimation of this desire on his part, she recoiled from him as if his touch were that of a serpent,—as if, indeed, *he* was *alone* the murderer, and *she* was pure and immaculate,—yet at the next moment she was seized with a sudden joy at the idea of not being doomed to pass the rest of that awful night in a deep, deep solitude!

She therefore consented;—and Frederick Dray accompanied Mrs. Brace to her own chamber.

CHAPTER CLIV.

THE MURDERER AND THE MURDERESS.

Two hours had elapsed;—and the footman lay sleeping by the side of his mistress.

Yes—soundly and undisturbedly he slept,—starting not with troubled dreams—nor giving utterance to a moan expressive of remorse nor of a cry indicative of terror. It seemed as if no memory of his crime haunted or appalled him,—as if no voice of blood whispered its vindictive warning in his ear—as if no pang shot through his heart. Calmly and deeply he slept,—no perspiration exuding in horror from his brow—no clenching of the hands—no feverish pulsation of the heart.

But that woman who had been the accomplice in his crime and who was now his paramour,—did she also sleep? Great God! what would she not have given to be enabled to sleep as that man by her side was then sleeping?

Sleep for her? No—not yet—not yet!

Tossing and turning in her place,—with lightning running in her veins and the scorching heat of fever over the entire surface of her skin,—now closing her eyes for a few minutes in the vain hope of wooing slumber—then opening them again and fixing them for the hundredth time upon the lamp which still burnt upon the toilette table,—then again essaying to compose herself to sleep, and again opening her eyes to assure herself that the light had not gone out,—now reasoning against the tremendous terrors which haunted her—now yielding to all their excruciating anguish,—at one moment persuading herself that it was impossible there could be such things as ghosts, and at another flinging her startled looks

around the room in dread of meeting the glazed and stony eyes of some spectre from the tomb,—now experiencing the weight of a stupendous consternation on account of the dead, dead silence which prevailed throughout the house—now springing up in the couch with a hideous terror as some unknown sound fell upon her ears,—at one time looking her position coolly in the face and weighing all the chances of future detection and permanent security—at another shuddering as alarms accumulated upon her guilty soul and made her contemplate the scaffold looming in the horizon,—such were the alternations of doubt, fancied safety, reviving dread, horror, hope, and despair, through which that woman passed!

Now the galling of her conscience became poignantly intolerable—now her heart sickened at the dread of detection and disgrace, and her very life seemed shrinking from her bosom. Her memory seemed to curse her with its appalling recollections—to blast her with the lightning vividness of its thoughts—to crush her with the weight of all that filled its cells even to bursting, as the veins and vessels may become gorged with blood. Never were her ideas so harrowing—so fraught with excruciating torture. Now through her soul there seemed to gush the piercing, rending, lancinating torrent of all the aggregate calamities known to mortal experience: scaring, mysterious, and horrible sensations were upon her.

Vainly did she writhe in her couch:—vainly did she toss and turn, as if to free herself from some tremendous load—some monstrous oppression which sate upon her like a night-mare. Upon soul and body that awful sensation was paramount—dominating all feeling, all sense, all power, all energy. Then, in another moment, her brain would become a whirlwind—her ideas chaos—her thoughts confusion. Distraction would claim her in due turn as its prey;—and thus she went on, despairing, hoping, fearing, maddening, rapid as such thoughts only can be!

'Twas a wondrous, a terrible, and a mysterious phantasmagoria that was passing through the mind of the murderess. And, O God! how scorching, withering, blasting were the lightnings of many of those images which thus shot athwart her brain!

Yes—the punishment of the murderess begins upon earth!

Now the miserable, miserable woman raised herself upon her elbow and contemplated the features of the man who slumbered by her side. Oh! how she envied him that calm, undisturbed, and apparently dreamless slumber in which he was entranced! At that moment she would have given all she was worth,—her costly furniture, her splendid jewels, her massive plate, her elegant wardrobe, her money in the funds—aye, all her riches—all—all,—for only one sip of that Lethean cup in which the accomplice of her guilt had thus steeped his own senses. Long did she gaze upon him—upon that man whose iron soul seemed proof against the stings of conscience and whose memory was a tranquil lake disturbed not by the corpse which its deep waters entombed!

And then into her mind stole the recollection that she had resolved to murder the man who was sleeping by her side and whom she had been compelled to receive to her arms,—the man who had evinced so heartless an indifference and so brutal a callousness in demanding and exacting the pleasures of love within so short a time after the perpetration of a diabolical murder! And she conceived a horrible hatred—an intense loathing for that man whom crime had made her equal, her companion, and her bedfellow—aye, and who had already asserted the domination of a master. But though Mrs. Brace thus entertained such hostile feelings and so profound a repugnance with regard to him, she dared no longer harbour the idea of making *him* also a victim! No—she felt that there was enough of turpitude weighing upon her soul,—more—far more than she could contemplate with coolness—and too much for any one mortal to have to answer for!

Placing her head upon the pillow once more, she again—for the hundredth time—endeavoured to settle herself to sleep. But terrible visions continued to haunt her. Fruitlessly did she essay to turn her thoughts into other channels,—to retrospect over the past—to feast her imagination upon the pleasures of earlier days: whichever way her mental eyes were turned, they were sure to behold a corpse at the end of the vista into which they plunged their looks.

At length she beheld a sickly and solitary gleam of dawn stealing between the curtains;—and she felt that unless she closed her eyes in slumber for at least a short half-hour, she should be totally unfitted for the occupations and duties of the coming day. Rendered a coward by her guilty conscience, she was now terrified by the thought that strange suspicions would be excited by the harassed, haggard, and care-worn aspect which she must inevitably wear if unrefreshed by sleep; and she wrestled against wakefulness with all her power. But still she slept not—still did slumber avoid her pillow!

Gradually did the day advance, making a sort of "darkness visible" in the chamber—then affording that indistinct and twilight view of things which allows the fevered imagination such dread scope for torturing the most ordinary objects into the most hideous phantom shapes,—while the lamp condensed its pale rays into a small red globe of flame.

And it was now that an incipient heaviness began to weigh down the eyes of the milliner and that a vague, dreamy, but not altogether tranquil repose was stealing over her,—when she fancied that there was a stir of life somewhere in the room! All in an instant did she waken up again—waken as completely up as before,—while her looks were thrown in terror around the chamber. She listened—with suspended breath and upheaved bosom she listened: and again she fancied that there was a sound like the rustling of the curtains!

A cold perspiration started out from every pore: she was bathed all in a moment in her own agony. Her breath came short and gaspingly—a nervous sensation seised upon her limbs—an awful consternation struck upon her brain.

And now that rustling, at first so gentle and scarcely perceptible, was renewed: and the horrible conviction was carried to her heart, with the piercing and chilling effect of an ice-shaft, that it was *not* the mere work of fancy!

Some *one*, or some *thing*, was moving in the chamber! She held her breath again—she listened in the hope of being relieved from her terrors by finding that it was her companion exhibiting some restlessness: but *he*—*he* slept on calmly and undisturbedly.

Nerving herself with all the courage she possessed—or rather, acting upon the impulse of that desperation to which the wretched woman was goaded—

she raised herself in the couch—paused to listen once more—and then, as the sounds still continued, she sent forward one fearful glance towards the window whence the strange rustling came.

But suddenly all became still—leaving the miserable Mrs. Brace unrelieved of her terrors, or rather a prey to a suspense fraught with an equal agony,—so appalling was the weight that sate upon her soul—so painful was the sickness that hung about her heart!

Suddenly her doubts were dissipated and her worst fears were confirmed: for the curtains were parted, as if by some object passing between them—and yet she saw nothing! Her hair rose crisp upon her head—and such a tightness seized upon her heart that she felt as if the moment of annihilation were at hand!

Appalled by the fearfulness of the thoughts that swept with whirlwind speed across her brain, she was unable to cry out: petrified and actionless by the stupor of a tremendous consternation, her form was rigid as that of a statue while her soul was tortured with the agonies of hell.

Then, as a still more terrific creeping stole along her nerves,—and as she fell back on her pillow with eyes fixed and limbs rigid, as in a fearful waking trance,—she became conscious, beyond all possibility of doubt, that light and rapid footsteps were crossing the floor of the chamber!

She endeavoured to give vent to her terror in a loud cry: but her lips remained sealed—a mist fell upon her senses—and consciousness abandoned her.

Almost at that very instant Frederick Dray awoke with a start: for a hideous dream had suddenly swept through his imagination.

The dawn had by this time advanced so far as to render all objects in the room tolerably clear;—and throwing his looks upon Mrs. Brace, she man was instantly shocked by the impression that she was dead. But placing his hand upon her breast, he felt her heart palpitating feebly within, while her body still retained sufficient warmth to dispel the awful idea which had first struck him.

But at the same moment he was startled by a strange sound which reached his ear;—and for an instant he felt a cold terror strike to his heart. He was not however the man to yield himself up to superstitious alarms;—and, almost immediately recovering his self-possession, he listened with a breathless attention. The singular noise was continued; and it sounded like a low scratching against the door, accompanied by a subdued whining lament.

The truth flashed in a moment to the brain of the murderer;—and, tearing aside the curtain, he received the confirmation of his thought;—for *there*—scraping, pawing, and whining at the door—was the mongrel dog of the murdered Mobbs!

Without pausing to devote any attention to Mrs. Brace, Frederick Dray sprang from the bed and rushed towards the dog. But the beast, having an instinctive apprehension of his design, flew under the bed. The footman lifted the drapery and beheld the eyes of the animal shining with a lurid glare in the obscurity. Unhesitatingly creeping beneath the couch, he crawled on his hands and knees towards the mongrel, which now began to growl with a subdued ferocity. Still undaunted, the footman made his way nearer and nearer to the brute, with one hand now ready to grasp its throat should it attempt to fly at him. But the beast kept backing before him, until it passed from under the bed, and thus retrogressively worked its way into a corner. Then, with a courage worthy of a nobler cause, the footman fastened his iron grasp upon the dog's neck, and with both hands he held the brute as if it were in a vice.

The dog struggled desperately—but could not utter the slightest sound. The footman's fingers pressed deep into its throat—its tongue was lolling out—and it was already writhing in mortal agony,—when the door of the chamber suddenly opened—and Harriet the lady's-maid entered the room!

Startled by this abrupt incident, Frederick Dray relaxed his hold upon the dog;—and before he could recover it, the maddened brute fastened its teeth upon his naked arm, lacerating the flesh severely. A terrible string of oaths fell from the footman's lips: but the dog swept past him—rushed to the door which Harriet still held open in her hand—and sprang down the stairs. A servant was at that moment sweeping out the shop, the front door of which stood open;—and thus the mongrel Toby, meeting with no farther impediment, succeeded in effecting its escape from the clutches of Frederick Dray.

It would be difficult to describe the mingled astonishment, grief, and rage, which sprang into existence in Harriet's bosom, when she thus burst upon a scene which afforded her unmistakable proof that her lover—or rather the man whom she looked upon as her lover—had passed the night with Mrs. Brace. For a few moments she remained stupified, holding the door wide open: but when the dog shot so wildly past her, a scream of terror burst from her lips;—and the sound of anguish recalled Mrs. Brace to consciousness.

Then began a war of bitter reproaches poured forth on one side and earnest entreaties on the other,—Harriet upbraiding her mistress in terms that were strong without coarseness or vulgarity—and the milliner exerting all her powers of persuasion to pacify the angry and outraged abigail,—while Frederick Dray was busily employed in winding a piece of linen round his injured arm.

Ultimately the footman was compelled to interfere, for the purpose of putting an end to a scene which threatened to alarm the house;—and, partly by coaxing, and partly by menaces, he induced Harriet to promise her forgiveness for all that had occurred. This concession on the young woman's side was however accompanied with a certain sullenness and subdued discontent which showed that she had yielded to alarm rather than to the prompting of her own inclination;—and Mrs. Brace understood full well that she must in future regard her lady's-maid as a secret enemy.

CHAPTER CLV.

THE FATE OF THE WORKING-MAN'S WIFE.

For four weary days did Mrs. Melmoth wander about the metropolis in search of her husband,—straining her sickly babe to her withered breast, and dragging after her the three weariad, starving children whose feet left the traces of blood upon the pavement.

Oh! miserable, miserable types of that sorrow, destitution, and wretchedness which the wealthy and tyrannical few have made the hideous heritage of the millions for centuries and centuries past,—

how terrible was your lot! All the woes of the plundered, the enslaved, and the persecuted of this world which a detestable oligarchy has converted into a hell, seemed to have concentrated their rage in order to vent that tremendous spite and implacable vengeance upon the heads of this devoted—doomed—outcast family!

But does not the tale come home to many a heart cankered by the galling chain of serfdom?—does not the picture strike with the force of a sledge-hammer upon the comprehension of those whose inheritance is poverty?

And if such be the effect produced, to no graphic merit on our part is the result ascribable—to no superior powers of delineation invested in us is that influence to be attributed. No: but the tale comes home thus to the heart of many, and the picture strikes thus upon the understanding of myriads, because TRUTH is at the foundation—and the public streets and gorgeous squares of mighty cities as well as the bye-lanes, and hedges, and ditches of the verdant provinces, present to the eyes those wandering, famishing, squalid specimens of society's outcasts, in numbers and aspect that would be disgraceful even to a barbarian State.

O Almighty God! how long must these things last?—how long are the millions to remain the slaves of the few?—how long wilt thou suffer the fruits of the earth to be monopolised by a tyrant oligarchy? Do thy thunders sleep, thou Creator of all?—or hast thou abandoned the world to chance and its proceedings to the wild will of those who rule by violence, by oppressive laws, by cruelty, and by blood?

For four days did the wife of the working man drag her weary limbs through the streets, and squares, and alleys of this vast metropolis—seeking her husband,—and vainly seeking! For four days did her children train at her heels, enduring the poignant anguish of famine, the brutality of constables, the insults of pampered flunkeys, and the frowns of the rich and great.

Stately equipages swept past, splashing them with mud—and no compassionate look was thrown upon that wretched family—no pence proffered from the hand of wealth and beauty. If they sank down, fainting and exhausted, upon the door step of a West End palace, a hall-porter, flaming with scarlet and yellow and bedizened with gold-lace, would drive them away as if they had just emerged from a lazar-house and their breath was fraught with pestilence. If they wandered forth into the suburbs with the hope of meeting a husband and a father there, a sign-board with a painted notice to the effect that "all vagrants found loitering about near those premises would be prosecuted according to law," scared them away. If they entered a churchyard and sate down to rest in the porch of the house of God, a burly beadle or a stern overseer would drive them roughly off. If they sought to enter the parks—*the people's parks*—those parks which belong to the nation, and consequently to all the individuals constituting this nation,—if they hoped to pass the gates of these enclosures, there was a harsh voice raised to warn them off and perhaps a cane wherewith to drive away the children? And wherefore?—because they were in rags—and your aristocratic folks, who frequent those parks, lolling listlessly in their splendid carriages, cannot bear the sight of rags!

No: away with the tatterdemalion from the same atmosphere which is breathed by Royalty and Aristocracy!—away with him or her to the House of Correction! What right have your starving, dying wretches to obtrude their squalid and half-naked forms upon the view of the gentle creatures who are clad in furs, and ermine, and silk, and velvet?

For four days, once again do we repeat, did the miserable mother and her children wander about in search of a husband and a father. And their search was vain. They did not forget to call at their old lodging—that sorry abode whence they had been so cruelly ejected;—and they inquired whether Melmoth had visited the place. The landlady responded in a sharp affirmative; and in the same breath she demanded whether Mrs. Melmoth had come to pay her the arrears of rent due. But the poor woman, heedless of the question, besought the landlady to give her the particulars of her husband's visit; and all she could learn was that he had called five or six days previously and was struck with consternation when he found that his family had left the house. Mrs. Melmoth likewise learnt that he had wept bitterly; and that he had rushed away in a sort of mingled frenzy and desperation, leaving no message behind him.

From time to time, during these four days of weary wanderings, Mrs. Melmoth heard vague but terrible rumours connected with the same appalling tale which had reached her ears in the low lodging-house,—how the graves of the dead had been violated and the corpses exhumed for the frightful but mysterious and incomprehensible purpose of mutilation. And these hideous narratives filled her with a horror that made the blood curdle in her veins and the pulsations of her heart stand still.

It was on the fifth morning of those fruitless wanderings that the unhappy family was traversing a fashionable street at the West End of London, when Mrs. Melmoth was suddenly seized with so severe an illness that she sank down upon the steps leading to the front door of a lordly mansion. A mortal terror came over the poor creature—a terror accompanying the sensation of approaching death: for the reflection—the harrowing reflection flashed to her mind—"What was to become of that poor sickly babe and the other children, if she were to be called away from them?"

Oh! the dire anguish—the ineffable misery—the acutely rending grief, which a parent experiences when her soul's secret voice within asks this tremendous question!

And that anguish—that misery—that grief were now felt by Mrs. Melmoth, as she sank down on the door-step. The three eldest children were clinging around her in a moment,—when the door suddenly opened and a stout domestic, apparelled in a gorgeous livery, commanded them all to rise and depart, or he should be forced to send for the constable!

But the poor children were heedless of his voice: for they were absorbed in the dread spectacle presented by their mother, who now fell back on the steps. The eldest boy took the babe from her arms and gave it to his sister to hold: then, with tears streaming down his cheeks, he bent over his dying parent, exclaiming in a voice of intensest anguish, "Oh! look up, dear mother—look up, I beseech you! Say but one word—tell me that you are not very, very ill—that you will soon be better——Oh! do tell me *that!*"

But the poor creature was unable to speak;—and as she raised herself up with immense difficulty and

fixed her glazing eyes upon her children, an expression of indescribable anguish passed over her countenance. For in that supreme moment of her mortal existence—while the spirit hovered between two worlds, and the last breath fluttered upon her ashy lips, and life was about to flit away for ever—she seemed to feel with the most poignant anguish the dread condition in which her friendless, almost orphan offspring would be left behind her.

And, O God! who can describe the look—the last look, which she fixed upon her children?—a look so full of mingled fondness and despair—so fraught with deepest, holiest love, combined with an awful agony of doubt and fear, that no language could convey all its meaning nor delineate its intensity.

And around her were those weeping children, the eldest of whom alone understood that his mother was *dying*, and the others weeping so bitterly because they thought that she was ill and because they beheld their brother weep likewise.

And still upon the threshold of the door stood the pompous servant, commanding them to depart—menacing them with the constable—and bidding them observe that *he* was too shrewd to be taken in by what he denominated "the sham illness" of the woman.

Some persons were soon attracted to the spot; and it was then discovered that the poor creature was really dying. Alarmed at this announcement—not because he pitied that perishing mother surrounded by her offspring, but because he was frightened lest the corpse should be brought into the house, and he had a horror of the dead—especially a dead pauper,—the stout footman banged the door violently and hastened down to the servants' hall to relate to the other domestics all that was occurring.

And *there*—upon the cold stone steps—at the rich lord's door—the homeless, famished, vagrant wife of the English working-man gave up the ghost;—and while her children were borne away to the workhouse by the beadle of the parish, the lifeless mother was laid out upon a stretcher and carried to the dead-ward of the same establishment, to be interred so soon as the contracting undertaker had time to knock up together the few thin deal boards constituting the pauper's coffin!

CHAPTER CLVI

THE PRINCESS AND HER LOVER.

RETURN we now to that secluded dwelling in the environs of Windsor, where Sir Richard Stamford had fixed his abode.

It was evening: the curtains in the parlour were drawn—the fire burnt cheerfully in the grate—the lamp shone upon the table—and the atmosphere was warm, and likewise perfumed with the odour of some early flowers reared in a hot-house. These were doubtless the present of some lady of rank and wealth;—and indeed the fair donor was now seated upon the sofa by the side of the baronet.

Is it necessary to inform our readers that Sir Richard's companion was the Princess Amelia?

Yes—in a comparatively humble attire, the royal lady was gracing that room with her divine presence. But let us not be mistaken: we do not speak fulsomely of her as the daughter of a King—for our's is the last pen on the face of the earth that would record anything adulatory of rank for mere rank's sake alone. No: it was not because she was a Princess that we depict her as embellishing that chamber: but it is as a woman—a charming, amiable, and generous-hearted woman that we now regard her.

And as she sate by the side of Sir Richard Stamford, with one fair hand locked in his own, she gazed upon him with looks full of tenderness—full of love—full of profound and impassioned affection;—and the heightening colour of her damask cheeks and the deepening scarlet of her plump and juicy mouth, combined with the gentle heaving of her bosom, indicated the soft desires that were animating her soul. For that was the age of low gowns and transparent dresses; and more than half of the royal lady's voluptuous breast was revealed to view, when her scarf was laid aside. Thus the swelling and falling of those luxuriant globes of snow were plainly visible;—and as the baronet felt the warm pressure of Amelia's hand and beheld her glowing bust,—when, too, he saw the tint of the rose deepening into that of the carnation upon her cheeks, and her fine blue eyes becoming more melting and tender in expression,—he would have been something more or something less than man had he not caught the effluence of that desire and the spirit of that sensual longing which exhaled as it were from the beauteous person of the royal maiden.

With rapture—oh! with ineffable rapture, did he gaze upon this young, lovely, and confiding creature who had given him her heart and was now prepared to give him her virtue;—and as his eyes wandered slowly over her heavenly countenance and her form so rich in all its virginal contours, he could scarcely believe that this radiant being, so full of vigorous youthfulness and with such a grand destiny in the perspective if she chose to pursue it,—he could scarcely settle his mind, we say, to believe that she was really his—and his only!

And truly, truly, the Princess Amelia was a charming creature. Arrayed in the simple vestures which she had purposely assumed to escape observation when visiting her lover, she possessed an air of amiability which could not fail to win the heart independently of the power exercised by her personal loveliness. And this loveliness was of no common order: indeed, it has been already described in an earlier chapter;—but never, perhaps, did it appear to greater effect than on the present occasion. For the royal maiden wore a dark dress which set off her light shining hair and her alabaster skin to the utmost advantage. Her beauteous hand and delicate wrist, with their tracery of blue veins, were thrown into admirable relief by the dark sleeves that covered the robust yet well-modelled arm;—and above the low and sloping corsage of her dress the well-rounded bosoms rose in all their luxuriant grandeur and their stainless purity. The dazzling fairness of her skin was such that it shone through the black silk hose of delicate texture which marked the shape of the well-turned ankle;—and the riband turning round it served to display its elegance of proportion all the more advantageously.

There was an air of ardent languor in her whole appearance;—and her person—her looks—her smile, all breathed a refined voluptuousness which was well calculated to ravish the heart and pour floods of ecstacy into the soul of her lover. Around

this charming creature did a perfume of love seem to float, intoxicating the senses of him who was thus basking in the warm and mellowed sunshine of her looks and smiles; and with the soft enthusiasm of holy love that he felt for her in one sense, was mingled the more earthly longing transfused from her own glowing temperament.

"Beloved Amelia," he said, in a soft low tone, "you have asked me if I am happy now—and I can truthfully reply that my felicity is complete. Ten days have now elapsed since you permitted me to declare that I love you: and on that occasion—oh! how memorable was the hour!—you confessed to a kindred feeling. And during those ten days, not one has elapsed without bringing you hither to irradiate the gloom of my solitude. Ought I not therefore to be happy?—ought I not to forget the past, and think only of the present and the future!"

"Yes—ten days have elapsed, Richard," murmured the Princess, burying her blushing countenance upon her lover's breast as she spoke,—"since I threw myself into your arms and declared that I was henceforth your wife—and that you must consider yourself my husband. Yes—upon that occasion I vowed to love you as the being most dear to me in the whole world—dearer than parents, brothers, and sisters—dearer than all that wealth and rank can bestow."

"And you have not repented of this promise, my Amelia?" said the baronet, passing his arm gently round her waist.

"No—Oh! no—I never shall repent!" she murmured, her whole form vibrating to his fond pressure: and throwing her head back in a soft sensuous langour, she regarded the ceiling as if in deep communing with herself.

And as that charming head was supported by the back of the sofa, the attitude which her person thus took was one of such complete abandonment that

her lover had never known her to yield to before,—an abandonment which profiled all the undulating lines of her full but symmetrical form. There was something irresistibly inviting—something overpoweringly ravishing in this attitude;—and as the eyes of the baronet swept over the beauteous features which were thus outlined and the flowing developments of her person which were thus thrown forth, he felt that he could die on behalf of one in whom so many graces and such marvellous attractions were concentrated.

"Yes," she resumed, her eyes half closing, and her bosom heaving with a profound sigh of pleasure,—"I am thine, Richard—unalterably thine! But still meseems that you cannot altogether forget that difference in our social stations which the accident of birth has established: still must I complain that all the advances of love's tenderness have to emanate from me. Oh! why will you not treat me as an equal?—why will you not look upon me as your wife in reality as much as by virtue of the promise which I have made? Yet do I thank you—Oh! sincerely thank you, Richard, for all the delicacy of your conduct towards me: but at the same time I am anxious that you should forget me *as a Princess*, and know me—love me—treat me only *as a wife!*"

"Dearest, dearest Amelia," exclaimed the baronet, his whole form trembling with an unknown and ineffable joy, as he pressed her more closely to his heart and felt her glowing bosom palpitate profoundly beneath his hand as his arm encircled her waist,—"what would you have me understand?"

"That I am thine—thine altogether, my well be'oved!" she answered, in a tone of exultation and impassioned fervour: and throwing herself completely into his arms, she whispered in the broken and faltering voice that indicated emotions deeply stirred and desires profoundly excited, "Think me not the less worthy of all thy love because no priest's blessing may be bestowed upon our union: but remember that thou may'st wed me in the sight of heaven, if not in that of the world—and that the bond which thus unites us becomes as indissoluble as if it were rivetted by all the holiest ceremonies of the church."

"And dost thou not tremble for the consequences, my well-beloved Amelia?" asked the baronet, in a low and tremulous voice, as he strained to his breast that luxuriant but symmetrical form which was endowed with all the supple and elastic grace of an amorous bayadere when smothering her lover with devouring caresses.

"Those who love fondly—wildly—madly—passionately," murmured the Princess, "pause not to ponder upon consequences! The present absorbs their souls: the past is forgotten—the future is unheeded, and therefore undreaded! Such is my case, Richard: for I love thee fondly—wildly—madly—passionately!"

And as the royal lady thus spoke, she raised her head from his shoulder where it had reposed;—and, gazing upon him with her blushing, burning countenance, she looked into the depths of his eyes with an ardour that transfused its flames into his own soul.

"Dearest, dearest Amelia!" he murmured: "what a glorious view of heaven has this love of thine opened to my comprehension!"

And then they gazed upon each other for a long time in silence: but love, even when it is mute, speaks with a thousand eloquent tongues—and the soul has an ear which catches all the delicious outpourings of those secret and mysterious voices. Oh! these are moments of ineffable bliss and surpassing ecstasy,—when the very life appears to be melting in mingled joy and voluptuous languor—and when the impassioned looks that thus meet and thus convey vows more fervid than language could frame, unite in bliss and lose themselves for a long time in each other!

Yes—love has its intoxicating pleasures and its delirium of happiness; and the Princess Amelia now experienced all the glowing rapture and the elysian joyousness which fill the youthful heart when it feels another beating against its own. And carried away by the ardent longings which were devouring her, she pressed her lips to those of her lover; while he felt her entire form vibrating in his arms and her bosom palpitating like the long swell of the ocean after the whirlwind has swept over it. Her eyes, half closing, still looked love, and fondness, and desire from beneath their long lashes,—inundating him as it were with ecstatic raptures and bathing him in a warm flood of heavenly bliss: transports glided from one soul into the other by the mysterious mesmerism of that delicious contact of their forms and those transfusing looks of mingled tenderness and fervid passion;—all their thoughts and all their senses were absorbed in the enjoyment of the blissful *present*,—the *past* was indeed forgotten, the *future* as utterly disregarded;—and the royal lady abandoned her virtue to her lover as unresistingly and as confidingly as she had already bestowed her heart!

CHAPTER CLVII.

FLORIMEL AND THE PAGE.

THREE days had elapsed since the removal of Pauline Clarendon and her sister to their old residence in the Edgeware Road; and in the meantime Lord Florimel had received the letter which the young maiden had written to him, and to which allusion was made in a recent chapter.

It was evening: and the nobleman was seated in one of the parlours of his splendid mansion in Piccadilly—pondering in a deeply mournful reverie upon the sudden and to him unaccountable estrangement of Pauline's affections. For being totally ignorant of all the adventures which had occurred at the masquerade,—little suspecting that Lord Montgomery had personated him upon that occasion, or that Pauline had been made the dupe of the circumstances attendant on such a proceeding on the Earl's part,—the unhappy Florimel knew not into what channel to turn his conjectures in order to seek out a reason and a motive for the conduct of the beauteous being whom he loved so tenderly.

For the hundredth time since he had received the mysterious letter, did he now take it from his pocket-book and re-peruse the contents, which ran as follow:—

"Everything is at an end between us. I need not inflict upon myself the torture of expatiating on the motives which prompt this decision: your own good sense cannot fail to give you the assurance that I have no alternative but the adoption of this resolution. And the decision to which I have come, is unalterable. I have withdrawn myself from the world, and shall henceforth

devote all my care, all my thoughts, and all my attentions to my afflicted sister. It will be useless for you to attempt to discover my abode: but even if some accident should possibly make you acquainted with it, it were still more useless for you to ask an interview. In a word, I command your lordship to abstain from molesting me in any way: I entreat you to think of me no more. Dead to the world—dead to you—dead to the heart's best and purest affections, I exist only as a ministering friend and companion for my poor sister. Farewell, then, for ever!

"PAULINE."

The reader can fully comprehend how well calculated this note was to plunge the unhappy Florimel into the deepest perplexity and the profoundest sorrow. He remembered the former misunderstanding which was produced by the letter sent him by Mrs. Brace through the agency of Rose Foster; and he doubted not that some new error had arisen to inspire Pauline with a jealous animosity towards him. But he could not for the life of him settle his ideas upon any recent phase in his conduct which could have possibly become liable to any misconception. He had in reality proved fully faithful to all the pledges made by him to Pauline; and the reader has seen how firmly and prudently—how resolutely and cheerfully he resisted the overtures made to him by the unknown lady who sent the masquerade-ticket and the blue domino. In a word, he had not been guilty of a single weakness wherewith he might reproach himself since he had given Pauline such solemn pledges of fidelity and reformation: nor was he able to call to mind any incident which could possibly be misconstrued or lay him open to suspicion. His bewilderment was therefore equal to his sorrow.

Upon receiving the letter in the first instance, he had set off post haste to the Duke of Devonshire's villa near Aylesbury, with the feeble hope of obtaining some clue to Pauline's new residence. But in this endeavour he utterly failed: the servants at that establishment declined or were unable to answer his queries. In a state of mind bordering upon distraction he had returned to London; and, proceeding without a moment's delay to Devonshire House, he obtained an interview with the Duchess. Her Grace affected complete ignorance of Pauline's abode; and although she was melted even to tears by the mingled passion and pathos with which her noble young cousin proclaimed his innocence of any action calculated to wound the feelings or the dignity of Pauline, she nevertheless was not convinced by his pleading. On the contrary, she judged him entirely by his antecedents; and thus, while she pitied him deeply, she looked upon his present sorrow merely in the light of contrition and not as a sentiment so closely allied with innocence as it really was. Moreover, as he made not the slightest allusion to the masquerade, she herself did not touch upon it;—and even when he implored her to explain to him the motives of Pauline's conduct, if she herself happened to be acquainted with them, she evaded the subject as well as she was able, under the impression that he was hypocritically affecting ignorance on that head, because, if charged with being at the masquerade, he was prepared to deny the accusation. Thus, believing her cousin to be acting with duplicity in one sense though inspired with a sincere contrition in another,—but well aware that Pauline would not be prepared, at least in her present state of feeling, to accept the latter as an expiation for the former, — the Duchess avoided any explanatory comment and preferred playing the part of a listener. She likewise thought that some degree of punishment would aid in the effectual reformation of her cousin; and though she herself was far from being imbued with really virtuous principles, yet as a woman she could enter sympathetically into the feelings of her friend Pauline under the outrage which she firmly believed the maiden to have sustained at Florimel's hands.

Thus was it that the young nobleman retired from Devonshire House as much in the dark as ever, not only with regard to Pauline's new place of abode, but likewise in respect to the motives which had instigated her conduct towards him.

During the three days which had elapsed since he received the letter, Florimel had wandered on horseback amidst all the outskirts of the metropolis,—gazing intently up at the windows of all such neat little dwellings as he fancied to be of the kind which Pauline was likely to select for her seclusion: but it never once occurred to him that she could possibly have gone back to that selfsame villa where he had first formed her acquaintance. His search was therefore utterly fruitless; and we now find him seated in one of the apartments of his elegant mansion, plunged into a deep despondency and losing himself in vain conjectures relative to the misunderstanding which had occured.

While he was thus absorbed in his mournful reflections, the door was opened gently; and Rao, the black page, appeared upon the threshold. But the nobleman observed him not;—and the sable youth, gliding noiselessly into the room, stopped at a short distance from his master, whom he contemplated with the most steadfast earnestness.

Florimel was gazing upon the fire with a listless vacancy; and the flames thereof as well as the lustre of the wax candles burning upon the mantel-piece lighted his countenance with that Rembrandt effect which threw out one side of his face into strong relief. The page was thus enabled to observe the expression of deep despair which the young nobleman's features wore; and an undefinable smile of mingled malignity, joy, triumph, and hatred glided over the lips of the sable boy.

At length, fearing that he should be noticed while thus contemplating his master, Rao advanced into his presence.

"Well—what has brought you hither?" demanded Florimel, somewhat sharply: for he was annoyed at being thus disturbed in the midst of his reflections.

"Your lordship has issued no orders respecting the dinner hour," replied Rao, in his soft and subdued tone; "and it is now six o'clock. Will your lordship be pleased to have dinner served up at once?"

"Not immediately, Rao," replied the nobleman, in a kinder tone. "I have not the slightest appetite. I will ring when I wish dinner to be served up."

"May I most respectfully ask if your lordship feels indisposed?" said the boy, the glitter of malignity for an instant flashing in his eyes as he put the question.

"No—yes—that is, somewhat," responded Florimel: then, raising his head and looking up into

the youth's countenance, he said, "But wherefore do you ask, Rao?"

"Because I eat your lordship's bread," was the immediate though hypocritical reply; "and it would grieve me to the soul to learn that your lordship was either ill or unhappy."

"Unhappy!" echoed Florimel: "what makes you think that I am unhappy?"

"Perhaps your lordship is already angry with me for venturing the remark which has just fallen from my lips?" said Rao, in a tone of deep mournfulness and with a humble diffidence of manner.

"No—far from it," exclaimed Florimel, who was in one of those humours when sympathy is welcomed as a solace, come from whatever quarter it may. "I am desirous to deserve and retain the good feeling of all my dependants. Speak, then, freely—and tell me wherefore you fancy that I am unhappy."

"Because your lordship's altered manner and changed appearance tell the mournful tale," said Rao, throwing into his looks and voice an expression of profound melancholy;—"and also because I myself am too much accustomed to gaze upon the countenance of the unhappy, not to know when the shade which sits upon the heart darkens the features likewise."

"Ah! is it possible that you are acquainted with sorrow—you, who are so young?" exclaimed Florimel, forgetting his own griefs for the moment in the interest excited by the observation of the youthful page.

"I am acquainted with sorrow, my lord," was the reply, "because I have been tortured to the soul in witnessing its ravages upon the heart of one who is near and dear to me. Personally I am uninjured by the blow which has stricken *her*: but sympathetically, I am afflicted—profoundly afflicted."

"Ah! then it was some one whom you loved?" cried Florimel. "And yet you are a mere boy——"

"It was my sister," said Rao, in a low deep tone.

"Your sister!" repeated Florimel. "Then you have a sister still living? Methought, from what you told me when first I received you into my service, that you were without relatives or friends in the whole wide world?"

"I informed your lordship that I was an orphan and friendless," replied the boy, a tear—a gilded tear, wherein was reflected the light of a perturbed spirit, trickling down his cheek: but instantaneously dashing it away, he said, "Yes—I am an orphan, and I *was* friendless until you received me into your service. Had I not been deprived of my parents, that tremendous misfortune would never have occurred," he added, his manner indicating that he was now pre-occupied with an unquiet thought.

"To what misfortune do you allude?" asked Florimel, in a kind tone, at the same instant casting upon him a look of sympathy and encouragement as one extends a hand to a suffering friend.

"Oh! to what misfortune do I allude?" echoed Rao, with a singular expression of the countenance and a strange accent of the voice; while over his lips there swept a smile which might either have been taken as indicative of the bitterness of newly awakened grief or for the malignity of sarcasm: then, having uttered those words in obedience to the sudden impulse which prompted him, he seemed to return to himself—and said, "I was speaking of the misfortune which overtook my poor sister."

"And that misfortune?" exclaimed Florimel, interrogatively.

"I should rather have described it as the foul wrong that was done her, my lord," Rao hastened to observe.

"Where is your sister now?" inquired the nobleman.

"In the far-off land of our birth, my lord," was the response.

"And is she well provided for?—is she above want?" demanded Florimel, hastily: for the generous feelings of his heart were now deeply touched.

"She is fortunate in those respects, my lord," answered Rao: "but her heart is a wreck—one sentiment alone inspiring it now."

"And that sentiment?" said Gabriel.

"Is vengeance!" replied the sable boy, with a singular vehemence of tone and manner, almost amounting to a significancy.

"Then her wrongs are deep!" observed Florimel, his interest gradually becoming enchained in this conversation.

"Her wrongs are the foulest and the most fiend-like which a man can possibly heap upon the devoted head of a woman," returned the boy, his voice expressing a profound concentration of bitter feelings. "She loved one who deceived her—who led her to believe that she should become his wife, notwithstanding the disparity of their social rank—and who took an infernal advantage of the implicit faith and the blind confidence which that artless, unsuspecting girl placed in his honour and his love. Oh! there are seductions, my lord, the iniquity of which is deepened by circumstances to the blackest dye: and this was one of them!"

"I understand you, Rao," said the nobleman, a visible trouble coming over him as his own recollections reminded him that he was not altogether exempt from the liability to be similarly accused. "But proceed: you interest me. Who was this seducer of your sister?"

"An Englishman, my lord—a native of your own land," replied the sable youth. "Gloriously handsome was he, as sublimely beautiful was my sister; but while *her* heart was full of tenderness and truth, *his* was fraught only with deceit and perfidy. He abandoned her—shamefully abandoned her, when he learned that she was in a way to become a mother;—and their child was born in secrecy and in sin."

"And did the child survive?" asked Florimel, his tone made tremulous by the tide of recollections that was still flowing in unto his own soul.

"The child perished at its birth," continued Rao: "but the memory of my sister's shame and wrongs perished not with it. No—this memory survives; and it is immortal! I swore to avenge the injury wrought against my sister; and for this purpose I bade my native land farewell—perhaps for ever!"

"Then you are aware that your sister's seducer is in England?" said Florimel, in a tone of inquiry.

"Yes—and I know also that he is in London," answered the sable youth. "I have seen him!"

"Beware, my young friend, how you seek to vent your anger upon him, whoever he may be," said the nobleman. "Remember that there are laws to punish any injury or outrage done by one towards another; and that your sister's wrongs will be

deemed but a small extenuation for any deed of vindictiveness or sudden passion into which you may be hurried."

"I have well weighed all this, my lord," said Rao, in a mild but firm tone.

"And you have taken, I hope, a prudent view of the matter," continued Florimel. "For I feel interested in you—and I should be sorry to see you come to harm. But I suppose I may not ask you the name of your sister's seducer?"

"My lord, that is a secret which I dare not reveal," was the earnest but respectful reply.

"No—I will not seek to penetrate farther into your confidence than you may choose to admit me," exclaimed the nobleman. "At the same time, circumstances not only permit, but likewise enjoin me to proffer you my counsel in this matter. In the first place I feel well-disposed towards you; and therefore I have some claim upon your attention. Secondly, I am your master; and therefore you are bound to give me your ear willingly. Thirdly, you are a stranger in these realms; and hence it becomes my duty to warn you away from the path of danger. Remember, likewise, that when you first presented yourself to me and implored me to take you into my service to save you from the misery and destitution which threatened you in a land where you found yourself a friendless foreigner,—remember, I say, that I took compassion upon you and at once received you into my household. You gave me no references—showed me no testimonials: but I took your word for all you told me. This I did cheerfully—willingly—readily: because I felt persuaded that you were not deceiving me. But if you knew the English character well, you would learn to appreciate all the more deeply this action on my part: for you might have knocked at a thousand doors without receiving so much as a word of kindness, much less an asylum within! I do not remind you of all this to glorify myself; but simply to appeal to your sense of gratitude and induce you to follow the advice which good feeling and duty alike prompt me to offer. This advice is that you will renounce all thoughts of avenging yourself upon a man who has no doubt wronged your sister grievously: for the violence of that vengeance would only redound upon your own head."

"I thank your lordship for this well-meant counsel," said Rao, averting his head and speaking in a voice tremulous with emotion.

"And you will follow it?" exclaimed Florimel.

"I will think over it, my lord," was the response, delivered with a tone and manner so suddenly altered that Florimel was uncertain whether he had really made a lasting impression upon the boy's mind, or not.

"Could not some reparation be made to your sister?" inquired the nobleman. "Perhaps, if you were to call upon the individual who has wronged her, he might concede that atonement which lies in his power and which would place her in an independent position for the remainder of her days?"

"Ah! your lordship alludes to the recompense of *money*," said Rao, in a tone of withering scorn and with an unmistakable sneer of bitterness upon his sable countenance. "Yes—I am aware that the Englishman fancies that every wrong and every injury may be expiated by means of gold: I am aware that the same panacea which the law suggests for a broken head, is believed to be a sovereign anodyne also for a breaking heart! Pardon me, my lord, if I make these observations with a bitterness which it ill becomes a dependant to display in the presence of his master: but you have deigned to inquire into my domestic secrets and my sister's wrongs, and you will not be offended if I give free vent to all the ideas which this discourse has engendered in my mind. Know, then, my lord, that my sister cherishes those lofty notions and clings to those sublime feelings which lead her to regard her lost virtue as something which no price can atone for. She would sooner perish of utter misery than receive a pecuniary recompense for the happiness, the honour, and the self-respect which have been destroyed by a villain. No, my lord—there is but one atonement which the seducer can make: and *that* he never intended to accomplish even from the first."

"Your sister must be beautiful, Rao, if she be like you," said Florimel, scarcely able to repress a smile at the thoughts which the boy's last words had conjured up and to which he was now giving expression as delicately as he could, so as not to wound the feelings of his page: "but your own good sense must make you aware that an alliance between an Englishman of rank and one of the dark-skinned houris of the east would subject not only the bridegroom, but likewise the bride, to much that is disagreeable in this country."

"Yes, my lord—I am well aware that the conventional rules of English civilization," said Rao, with continued bitterness, "revolt against what are called *unequal marriages*. But the seducer should have thought of all this when he wooed my sister and when he won her upon the faith of his solemn pledges. He should have well weighed all the obstacles which circumstances might present to their union, ere he coldly, basely, and deliberately plundered her of the only jewel which she possessed. For was it not cruel, my lord—was it not atrocious—was it not fiend-like, for that man to introduce himself into the sanctuary of a young and confiding heart, merely to make a ruin of that temple and despoil that sacred shrine? Wherefore did he fasten the talons of his infamy upon that young bosom which beat only with devotion and love for him?—wherefore did he swoop like the ravenous vulture upon that innocent lamb which had neither the inclination nor the power to injure him?—and why did he spread his toils to ensnare that harmless, timid, bashful dove which suspected not the agreeable disguise that the treacherous fowler knew so well how to assume? Oh! my lord, put yourself in my place—fancy for an instant that it was *your* sister who had thus been wronged, thus injured, thus outraged,—and tell me, my lord, how you would act?—what course would you adopt towards the vile seducer?"

While thus speaking with an impassioned vehemence, the singular and enthusiastic boy fixed upon Lord Florimel a look in which so strange an expression shone that the nobleman was troubled. A sensation of uneasiness stole over him: for there was not wanting an incident in his own life the memory of which reminded him how deservedly and how justly the bitter, inveterate, and poignant reproaches which he now heard levelled against another seducer might be addressed to himself. Then that appeal to his own feelings—his own heart,—that home-thrust question how *he* would act if *his* sister were wronged by a villain,—Oh! all this was wormwood and gall to *him*;

—and therefore was he troubled in spirit as those words fell upon his ears, and as he encountered the strange looks which the boy fixed on him.

Florimel averted his eyes—he held down his head: for conscience made him ashamed;—and then an imperceptible smile of ferocious hate and savage triumph wavered for a moment upon Rao's lips.

"What would your lordship do in the case I have named?" he inquired, after a minute's pause, during which the nobleman had remained buried in a profound reverie.

"Why do you thus put the question so pointedly to me, boy?" demanded Gabriel, raising his head again.

"Because your lordship has given me such excellent advice," was the prompt answer, "that I feel convinced your lordship is a man of stern rectitude, lofty notions, unimpeachable honour, and generous sentiments. Your lordship is incapable of the black atrocity—the hideous guilt—the loathsome treachery, which that Englishman perpetrated towards my sister. Therefore does your lordship possess a heart capable of feeling for *her* who was seduced, and for *me* who am the brother of the victim,—a heart that while it thus sympathises with us, must necessarily hold in abhorrence the wretch who consummated the diabolical infamy. Is it strange then, that thus accurately reading your lordship's feelings—your lordship's sentiments—your lordship's ideas upon the subject,—is it strange, I ask, if I should put that question to which I am now respectfully but eagerly awaiting the reply?"

As these words, fraught with goading bitterness and cutting their way like a two-edged sword into Florimel's heart, flowed with iron eloquence from the lips of the sable page, the young nobleman's trouble increased visibly. They applied, syllable for syllable, to a certain incident in his own life—an incident which Rao's narrative brought with startling vividness back to Florimel's mind; and there were even moments during the impassioned outpourings of the youth's tongue, when the nobleman fancied that the tale—the reproaches—the bitterness—the infernal hatred, were all meant to be applied to himself. But when he again looked up into the boy's countenance, and beheld the deep melancholy which his features had now reassumed,—when, too, he reflected how impossible it was that the *one* incident just referred to could possibly be known to the sable page, and that even if it were the youth could have no possible interest of a personal nature in it,—he felt assured that this was only one of those coincidences which occasionally happen in the lives of men, and which make the reproaches they hear levelled against others come bitterly home to themselves.

"You must remember, Rao," he said, evasively, "that there are certain peccadilloes which are looked very lightly upon in this country; and the seduction of a girl is not deemed a crime."

"Peccadilloes, my lord!" exclaimed the youth, in a tone of indignation. "What! is it a trivial offence—a venial error—perhaps only an amiable weakness—to plunder an innocent, devoted, and trusting female of the only jewel which she possesses? Is it no disgrace to turn the brightness of honour into the darkness of shame?—is it no sin to change virtue into vice? If honour is something to be esteemed and admired, then he who tarnishes it is assuredly a villain;—and if vice is something to be loathed, then the man who teaches a woman to enter the path of vice, is assuredly a criminal of the blackest dye himself. It may be convenient, my lord, in this land of consummate civilisation," added Rao, with withering scorn and penetrating bitterness,—"it may be convenient for the wealthy profligate and the nobly-born voluptuary to paint seduction in the mildest colours: but in the estimation of all truly honourable and really reflecting men, it must ever be ranked in the catalogue of the most heinous offences. What! to tear down a woman from the pinnacle of her purity—to poison the pure spring of her young heart's gushing affections—to render her an object of contempt and loathing in the eyes of the world—to annihilate her happiness at the same time with her innocence,—is all this no crime, my lord? Ah! I am certain—very certain that *you* would not like to have the weight of so foul a deed upon your conscience!" added the sable youth, fixing his dark eyes penetratingly upon the nobleman.

And Florimel's cheeks burned—and his lips quivered—and his whole frame trembled, as these words smote upon his brain like the scorching breath of a pestilence;—and he fell into a confused and chaotic wondering whether the youth were really levelling those barbed arrows at his heart, or whether they only struck into its core at random. But again persuading himself that it was his own guilty conscience which thus self-appropriated the boy's remarks, he threw off the sense of confusion, shame, and annoyance which had seized upon him;—and he was just on the point of making some observation in order to put an end to a discourse so little palatable, when a loud double knock at the front-door resounded through the mansion.

Rao bit his lip with a sudden paroxysm of spite and vexation at having the interview with his master thus interrupted: then, gliding from the room, he returned at the expiration of a couple of minutes, ushering in Mr. Cresswell, Lord Florimel's solicitor.

CHAPTER CLVIII.

MENACING PROSPECTS.

The professional adviser of Lord Florimel presented a striking contrast with Mr. Rigden, the attorney to Earl Montgomery. For inasmuch as the latter was cold—wary—suspicious—and keen in every sense of the word, the former was bustling—active—frank—and generous. Not that he possessed one atom less legal ability than the other: but he was a man who studied to deal honourably alike with clients and adversaries—and he would have scorned the petty chicanery and devious proceedings to which Mr. Rigden unhesitatingly had recourse when it was worth his while to put such illegitimate modes of action into requisition.

In person Mr. Cresswell was short, thin, and pale-faced: his features, though sharp, wore an expression of mingled good humour and intelligence;—and his conversation as well as his manner denoted the frankness of an honest man.

After the usual salutations were exchanged between the nobleman and his attorney, and the latter had taken a seat in compliance with the for-

mer's invitation, the object of this professional visit was explained.

"I am truly sorry to be the bearer of evil tidings to your lordship," said Mr. Cresswell: "but my duty prompted me to lose no time in calling to acquaint your lordship with something unpleasant that has occurred."

"I cannot conceive how anything of a disagreeable nature can possibly occur with regard to my affairs," observed Lord Florimel, surveying his solicitor with astonishment: "but pray explain yourself."

"I have just received a letter, my lord," resumed the man of business, "from an attorney named Rigden, stating that inasmuch as he is aware of my having the honour to be your lordship's professional adviser, he wishes to know whether I will receive service of the necessary process in the commencement of a suit which, it appears, he is instructed to open against your lordship."

"A suit against me!" exclaimed Florimel. "And for what purpose?—on what ground?"

"A claimant has started in respect to your lordship's estates and the peerage which your lordship enjoys," replied Mr. Cresswell.

"But this is ridiculous!" ejaculated the young nobleman. "Who is the claimant?—and what are the pretences set forth?"

"The claimant, my lord," answered Cresswell, "is a certain Mr. Woodfall—George Woodfall——"

"Ah! Woodfall!" cried Florimel, struck with a sudden reminiscence and likewise with a feeling of alarm. "I remember to have read certain proceedings which were instituted by a Mr. Woodfall some fifty or sixty years ago against my grandfather, respecting the peerage and estates which were then held by my ancestor and which have descended to me. But when the affair came to be properly argued before the House of Lords, it was given against that Mr. Woodfall in the most unequivocal manner. I presume, however, that the present claimant who has thus suddenly sprung up, is a descendant of that same Mr. Woodfall of whom I have just spoken."

"No doubt of it, my lord," said Mr. Cresswell. "But at present I am altogether in the dark as to the grounds of his claims, Mr. Rigden having merely written me the formal letter usual in the initiative of such cases."

"And of course you have undertaken to receive the process on my behalf?" observed Florimel, inquiringly.

"I instantaneously returned Mr. Rigden an answer to that effect," said the attorney.

"The whole affair lies in a nut-shell and will be easily settled by the production of certain deeds in my possession," continued Florimel. "In fact, the point, so far as I remember it, may be thus explained:—My great grandfather, when somewhat advanced in years, became enamoured of a young female of humble birth but great beauty. He was a widower and childless. Emma Woodfall, the young person in question, became his mistress in the first instance and subsequently his wife. Two sons were the issue of that connexion; but it has been very satisfactorily ascertained that the marriage did not take place until *after* the birth of the elder son. Consequently he was illegitimate, and could not possibly have claimed the peerage under any circumstances, nor the estates except under the provisions of his father's will. No will in his favour was ever made: at least, none has ever been produced. He married early—had issue—and died before his father. From him are the Woodfalls descended; whereas the branch to which *I* belong is that of the younger son. This younger son was unquestionably born in wedlock; and consequently his posterity have enjoyed the honours and estates of the house of Florimel. When the affair came before the House of Lords fifty years ago, it was the heir of the elder brother disputing the title and right of the younger brother himself. The point alleged was that the marriage between the old lord and Emma Woodfall had taken place a few days *before*, and not some weeks *after*, the birth of the elder son. But the evidence was by no means conclusive; on the contrary, it was shown to the satisfaction of the House of Lords that the elder son was *not* born in wedlock. Notwithstanding the decision of their lordships confirming my grandfather in the possession of the peerage of Florimel, the suit still went on in Chancery respecting the estates: but an amicable arrangement at length took place, in virtue of which the Woodfall family—that is to say, the heirs of the elder brother so often alluded to—received a certain sum of money and resigned all future claims to the property. This compact was effected by a document duly drawn up; and which document is amongst the title-deeds and other family papers now in my possession. You thus comprehend the whole transaction; and you may likewise form a tolerably accurate notion of the nature of those claims which the present Mr. Woodfall is likely to advance."

"I understand the matter thoroughly, my lord," observed Mr. Cresswell. "It is very fortunate that you are in possession of the document to which you have alluded: because the claim to the peerage and that to the estates are in some sense very distinct. You have the decision of the House of Lords to advance against the former; while the deed of compact is a complete answer to the latter. Does your lordship know anything of this George Woodfall?"

"Only that he is an artist," replied Florimel. "His father was a dissolute man, who lavished a large fortune with the most wanton extravagance; and the two branches of the family have been for years estranged from each other. I mean that the branch to which I belong and that of the Woodfalls have held no communion for many years past. The breach took place before I was born;—and therefore I cannot be accused of any neglect towards this George Woodfall, inasmuch as he never applied to me for succour or assistance. At all events, his claims are utterly unfounded; and perhaps the better course for you to adopt, Mr. Cresswell, would be to call on Mr. Rigden—explain the whole matter to him—show him the deed of compact—and satisfy him at once that his client has not the faintest ground for a law-suit."

"The plan suggested by your lordship shall be duly carried into effect," said Mr. Cresswell. "You had better give me all the documents at once; and I will look over them this evening, in order to be well prepared to see Mr. Rigden to-morrow."

"I will fetch you the papers immediately," observed Lord Florimel.

With these words, the young nobleman quitted the room; and as he passed through the hall towards the marble staircase, he bade Rao follow him with a light. The youth accordingly procured a candle; and Florimel repaired to his bedchamber, attended by the sable page.

"Drag forth that tin-box from under the couch, my boy," said the nobleman: then, the moment this was done, he added, "And now take something to sweep off the dust before I open it."

Florimel's command was forthwith obeyed;—and when the box was thus rendered fit for his aristocratic fingers to touch, he proceeded to open it with a key attached to a small bunch which he was in habit of carrying in his pocket.

But scarcely had he raised the lid, when a cry of mingled amazement and alarm burst from his lips: for, behold! the papers were gone—the tin-case was empty!

"Is anything the matter, my lord?" inquired Rao, contemplating his master with looks expressive of a deep and earnest interest.

"Almighty God! what can be the meaning of this?" exclaimed Florimel, a ghastly pallor now spreading itself over his countenance and a nervous trembling seizing on his entire frame. "The papers gone!—the sanctity of my own chamber violated by the hand of a thief!—what does it all mean?"

"Your lordship seems to miss something of importance?" said Rao, still gazing earnestly upon him.

"Importance, boy!" ejaculated the bewildered and terrified nobleman, regardless of what he was saying: "importance, forsooth! It is ruin—absolute ruin to me——or at least the chance of ruin!" he exclaimed, in a wild tone and with frantic gesture.

"Ruin!" murmured Rao to himself, as he turned aside for a moment, to conceal heaven only knows what expression of countenance as he repeated that word—that appalling word—"Ruin!"

"I cannot have placed the documents elsewhere," said the nobleman, struggling to wrestle against the excitement of his feelings and sooth himself into the calmness requisite to look this menacing calamity face to face. "And yet it must be so! Yes—I have doubtless secured these papers elsewhere—now forgetting alike the place and the circumstance itself. Such will unquestionably prove the case," he added, in a musing tone: "for no one could have visited that box without leaving some trace of violence behind. Yet it was not broken open—the lock was not forced—and the key is always in my possession. During the day it is about my person: by night it is placed under my pillow. True, I sleep with my chamber-door unlocked: but who could possibly have done this at night-time without disturbing me?"

Thus mused Lord Florimel in a tone which, although low, was still sufficiently audible to reach the ears of Rao, whose presence he seemed to have forgotten, and who was standing at a short distance with his eyes fixed steadfastly upon his master's countenance.

For a minute longer did Florimel stand gazing down into the empty box, straining to wring from his memory some recollection to guide him to the discovery of the missing papers; then, all on a sudden feeling how useless it was for him thus to give way to a wildering perplexity instead of adopting the practical measure of a rigorous search, he turned abruptly towards a chest of drawers which stood behind him.

"What! are you still here?" he demanded of Rao, whose presence actually startled him for the moment.

"Your lordship did not command me to retire," answered the youth, in a subdued and mild tone.

"True! Assist me, then, to examine all these drawers," said Florimel. "It is a parcel of very important papers which I have lost—or rather mislaid—for *lost* they can scarcely be," he added, with the sickly endeavour to buoy himself up by means of that hope to which men cling even in their very desperation.

But vainly were the drawers searched: fruitlessly were all their contents flung forth and scattered upon the carpet. The documents were not to be found! The cupboards in that chamber and the adjoining dressing-room were next examined; but with equal want of success. Every nook was searched—every corner was ransacked: still no signs of the missing papers were discovered. At length Lord Florimel remembered the plate-chest: surely he must have deposited the deeds there? But no: not a trace of them was visible;—and, after three-quarters of an hour's fruitless investigation, he was compelled to admit to himself that the documents must have indeed been stolen!

And now amidst the whirlwind of perplexing and torturing ideas which swept through his brain, his suspicions could settle upon no one. There was not in his household a single person whose name suggested itself in association with this deed. All was darkness—all was mystery: and in spite of his own settled convictions—in spite of the only one possible conclusion to which he could now come—namely, *that the papers must have been purloined*—he still sought to delude himself with the belief that they were only mislaid,—thus hoping on even against the death of hope itself!

But suddenly reflecting that it would be unwise to suffer the magnitude of his loss and the menacing aspect of its nature to become generally known, he made some observation to Rao to the effect that it was very annoying, but not quite so serious as he had at first fancied: then, bidding the boy precede him with the light, he hurried back to the apartment where he had left his solicitor.

To this gentleman he imparted the mysterious loss which he had experienced; and the worthy solicitor, fully comprehending how serious it was, and well knowing that Mr. Bigden's habitual sharp practice would induce him to seize with avidity upon any point advantageous to a client,—Mr. Cresswell, we say, deplored the occurrence with the most unfeigned sincerity. He however recommended that the misfortune should be hushed up with the utmost secrecy—so that the enemy might not learn the weak point which had thus been laid bare on Lord Florimel's side.

"Alas!" said the young nobleman; "this precaution, I am afraid, will prove very unnecessary. For if the papers be really stolen, they must have been purloined for a special purpose: and to answer what end could they be taken, unless it be to serve the interests of this claimant to my peerage and my property? Oh! my dear Cresswell, I have a presentiment striking cold to my heart, and warning me that

I am a lost—a ruined—a disgraced and despoiled man! Misfortunes are accumulating thickly upon me. The object of my dearest, holiest, tenderest love suddenly becomes estranged to me;—and now a more worldly calamity threatens me with destruction!"

Thus speaking, the unfortunate young nobleman gave way to his tears.

The kind-hearted attorney endeavoured to console him: but this attempt was by no means an easy task. At length Florimel's natural dignity as a man effected what the soothing words of the lawyer could not accomplish; and recalling every moral energy to his aid, he said, "This weakness is unworthy of me! I will tutor my mind to battle valiantly against misfortune; and, strangely altered though my prospects have suddenly become, I will not give way to despair so long as the feeblest glimmer of hope remains. Nor will I believe that the worst is in store for me, until the worst shall really have happened. In the meantime, my dear Cresswell, you m necessary measures for the defence of we shall at least have the satisfaction of foes hand to hand and foot to foot."

The lawyer was well pleased to observe his client entering upon this improved frame of mind; and, faithfully promising that the battle should not be lost without a gallant stand and a desperate struggle, he took his departure.

For some time after he was thus left alone, Lord Florimel remained plunged in a deep reverie: but suddenly starting from his meditations and his seat at the same moment, as an idea struck him, he wrapped himself up in his cloak and issued from the mansion.

* * * * *
* * * * *

An hour afterwards, Mr. Rigden received the following letter, the contents of which were written in a feigned hand, but evidently by a female:—

"The documents have been missed by Lord Florimel. He and his attorney are in a perfect consternation. They know that their cause will be lost: but they purpose to make *a gallant stand* and enter upon *a desperate struggle* against you and your client. Their conduct, however, only serves to prove more than ever the vital importance of those papers. Florimel entertains not the slightest suspicion *how* the deeds have disappeared: but he *does* suspect that they have found their way into the hands of either yourself or Mr. Woodfall. Be cautious—be firm—be secret!

"From time to time I shall give you such information as I may be enabled to glean, and which may prove beneficial to your client's interests."

This letter bore neither date nor signature: but Mr. Rigden had no difficulty in comprehending that it emanated from the same hand which had put the stolen documents into his possession—those documents the vital importance of which was now made more apparent than ever.

CHAPTER CLIX.

SCENES AT THE BEGGAR'S STAFF.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening—the same evening on which the incidents of the two preceding chapters occurred; and Carrotty Poll was seated with her friend the Gallows' Widow in the little parlour behind the bar at the Beggar's Staff. They were discussing a pint of wine between them; and their conversation was turning upon many matters,—speculations as to what could have become of the Magsman and the Big Beggarman, and remarks on the continued absence of Mobbs being amongst the topics thus commented upon.

Their discourse was all the more earnest and continuous, inasmuch as there happened to be but few guests in the public room at the time; and thus their confabulation was not interrupted—the services of the slip-shod waiter being equal to the demands made upon the excisable articles dispensed from the bar-counter.

"Well, I wonder what can be keeping Mobbs away like this," said Carrotty Poll, making the remark for the tenth time on the present occasion. "Surely no harm can have befallen him!"

"He is too wide awake to let the milliner get the advantage over him," observed the Gallows' Widow. "That she murdered Grumley, we are quite certain: but that she could succeed in getting Mobbs into her net, I do not for an instant suppose."

"And yet three days have now passed," said Carrotty Poll; "and he does not make his appearance. He came to tell us how his first interview with Mrs. Brace on the subject of Grumley's unaccountable absence went off——"

"Or rather how it was interrupted by the screams that came from another part of the milliner's house," observed Lizzy Marks, the Gallows' Widow. "But Mobbs told us that she had confessed the deed—that she even showed him where Grumley was buried—and that he was going back again to enter into arrangements with her. Now, we have only two conjectures to choose between——"

"Either that Mobbs has followed the fate of his master, or that he has bolted with the cash extorted from the milliner," interrupted Carrotty Poll. "Is that what you mean?"

'Just so," replied the Gallows' Widow. "But I, for my part, do not think that Mobbs has been made away with; on the contrary, I firmly believe that he has made away with himself."

"In other words, that he has cut and run in order to cheat us out of our *regulars*," said Carrotty Poll. "Well, if he don't make his appearance soon, I shall entertain the same opinion. But we wont judge hastily: circumstances may be keeping him away for a few days—and these he will explain, should he turn up once more. Let us therefore wait a little while before we resolve on adopting any step in the matter."

"And in the meantime Mrs. Brace may bolt, and we shall lose every chance of getting a shilling from her," said the Gallows' Widow.

"That is not likely," responded the Big Beggarman's daughter. "Whether she has made away with Mobbs or compromised the thing with him, she believes herself safe and secure, depend upon it,—and she will not easily be induced to give up her brilliant position and her splendid establishment at the West End. No: she will not run away, Lizzy: I am not afraid of that. And if Mobbs should really be still negotiating with her, he would be precious savage if we were to interfere in the business. It would at once show Mrs. Brace that others were in the secret besides himself; and *then* she really would bolt beyond all manner of doubt."

"Well, have it your own way, Poll," said Elizabeth Marks. "We will remain quiet a few days; and if Mobbs don't turn up in the meantime, then we must hold a serious conversation to decide how we shall act."

"I am glad you've fallen into my views on the subject," observed Poll.

"And now, when I think of it," exclaimed the Gallows' Widow, "I've got something of importance to tell you. In a word, I'm pretty sure that I have discovered a clue to the abode of that Julia Lightfoot——"

"Mrs. Page, you mean?" cried Carrotty Poll. "You know she married that rascal Page who gave evidence at the Old Bailey against Ramsey and Martin, and also against my father and Briggs. But what information have you procured concerning them?"

"The Kinchin Grand, who has been looking out for them this long time," answered Carrotty Poll, "saw them yesterday morning looking at two houses which are to let in the Edgeware Road—Paradise Villas I think the terrace is called—and he afterwards dogged them as far as a house-agent's office in the neighbourhood. When they came out again, he heard Page observe to his wife that *'the house would just suit them;'* and Julia answered that *'they should be able to move into it next week.'*—So, you perceive, we are on the right scent at last."

"Capital!" ejaculated Carrotty Poll. "But why didn't the Kinchin Grand follow them to their present place of residence? If any thing should happen to prevent them from taking that house in the Edgeware Road, all traces of them may once more be lost—and I never shall be happy till we've revenged ourselves on that cursed Julia and her husband."

"The Kinchin Grand would have followed them home," answered the Gallows' Widow; "but they took a coach immediately after they came out of the house-agent's office—and the vehicle drove too quick for my spy to keep them in view. However

There seems to be little doubt, from the observations they exchanged and which I have repeated to you, that they took the house of the agent yesterday morning. If so, depend upon it we *will be revenged* before they have been in possession of their new abode many weeks," added the Gallows' Widow, her countenance lowering into an expression of ominous ferocity.

Carrotty Poll was about to make some observation in approval of this dark menace, when the waiter entered to inform her "that a gentleman desired to speak to the master or the mistress of the house." Both the Big Beggarman's daughter and the Gallows' Widow rose and peeped forth at the visitor, who was standing at the bar-counter, muffled in a cloak, but with enough of his countenance revealed to enable them to catch a distinct view of his features. He was a total stranger to them—young—very good-looking—and with nothing in his appearance to excite their suspicions in any way: they accordingly resumed their seats and bade the waiter conduct the gentleman into their presence. This instruction was immediately obeyed; and the visitor was showed into the parlour.

"I am perfectly unknown to you," he said, in a soft and pleasing voice, as he took the chair to which Carrotty Poll pointed: "but I trust that you will pardon this intrusion, inasmuch as I am well prepared to pay for any services which may be rendered me in the business that has brought me hither, and to bestow a handsome recompense for any trouble that I may give."

"Who are you, sir?—and what has brought you to this place?" inquired Carrotty Poll, speaking in her politest tone.

"I am Lord Florimel," answered the young nobleman—for he indeed it was; "and my business is of a twofold nature, as I will immediately explain to you."

"First of all, my lord," said Carrotty Poll, "please to inform us who recommended you to apply here for any service that you may need at the hands of the people belonging to this house, or frequenting it."

"The explanation will not offend, I hope?" observed Florimel, with some little hesitation.

"It can't offend, my lord, if it is the truth," was the response.

"You speak with a frankness that shall experience an equal degree of candour on my side," immediately resumed the nobleman. "In a word, then, every one who knows anything at all of London life, must be aware that the Beggar's Staff is a great resort for persons of a particular class;—and I fancy that you are not altogether unaccustomed to receive visits from noblemen and gentlemen who on occasions stand in want of able hands, keen eyes, and secret servitors, for all of which auxiliaries they are able and willing to pay handsomely. Well, I see by your countenance that such is the fact;—and you therefore cannot be astonished if the reputation of the Beggar's Staff is tolerably familiar to all those who may be termed *men of the world* or *men about town*."

"The explanation is perfectly satisfactory," said Carrotty Poll. "And now for the business which has brought your lordship here. You may speak candidly and openly: if we enter into your views, whatever we undertake will be performed secretly, promptly, and faithfully—and if we decline, there is no harm done."

"I do not think you will refuse," observed Florimel; "because I am going to ask you to do nothing for which I am not prepared to pay a handsome price. In the first instance, I wish that some active, intelligent, and persevering agent should be set to work to discover the abode of a certain lady, whose name and description I will give you. I mention a description, because she may have assumed another name. I must however observe that she is a lady of unblemished virtue and stainless character; and that it is because I am deeply attached to her and that she has taken offence at some fancied misconduct on my part—it is for these reasons, I say, and for no dishonourable motive, that I am so desirous to trace out her present abode."

"We have nothing to do with motives, my lord," said Carrotty Poll; "but we will undertake the service you thus require at our hands. Give me the name and description of the lady, and by to-morrow at mid-day a dozen active agents shall be instituting inquiries in every part of London and its suburbs."

"The lady's name is Pauline Clarendon," returned Florimel: "and here is an accurate description of her personal appearance," he continued, handing a piece of paper to Carrotty Poll. "But mark me well and understand me fully, when I beseech you to conduct this research in such a manner that the proceeding may not reach the ears of Miss Clarendon. For were she to learn that I am adopting such a course to discover her residence, it would only widen the breach now existing between us: indeed, she would never forgive me."

"Your lordship's wishes shall be duly attended to," said Carrotty Poll. "And now what is the second branch of the twofold business that has brought your lordship to the Staff."

"I will explain myself as concisely and yet as plainly as possible," returned the young nobleman. "I am in the habit of keeping certain valuable documents in a large tin case, which stands under the bed in my chamber. The key I always carry about with me during the day, and place it under my pillow at night. It is a peculiar key, made to fit a lock of no ordinary construction. In a word, a mere skeleton key could not possibly open that lock. Nevertheless, I have discovered, within the last two or three hours, that this tin box has been opened—inasmuch as its contents are gone. No violence was used: not a trace of foul play is visible in the matter. And what renders the affair more difficult and mysterious still, is that I cannot fasten my suspicions upon a single soul dwelling beneath my roof: I cannot lay my finger upon the shoulder of any one and say, '*This is the thief!*'"

"And yet the papers must have been purloined for some special purpose?" remarked Carrotty Poll, inquiringly.

"Yes," replied Florimel. "A certain lawyer named Rigden, and a certain person named George Woodfall——"

"An artist?" exclaimed the Gallows' Widow, struck by the name.

"The same," cried the nobleman. "Are you acquainted with him?"

"I have seen him once," was the answer. "It

was then in the service of a certain Mr. Shrubsole, picture-dealer, of Newgate Street."

And the Gallows' Widow exchanged a rapid but significant glance with Carrotty Poll: for the reader cannot have forgotten that Elizabeth Marks became acquainted—if acquaintanceship it could be termed—with George Woodfall on that memorable night when the Magsman escaped from Newgate.

"But pray proceed, my lord," she said: "for the little I know of Mr. Woodfall cannot be rendered in any way available to your lordship's purposes—nor indeed would Mr. Woodfall be over well pleased to renew his acquaintance with me," she added, with that low inward chuckle in which the woman sometimes indulged.

"I was about to observe," continued Florimel, perceiving that the Gallows' Widow had some private reasons of her own for not choosing to be more communicative respecting her knowledge of the young artist,—"I was about to observe that Mr. Woodfall has instituted certain law-proceedings against me, and that a Mr. Rigden is his attorney. Now this Mr. Rigden is a man whose practice is notoriously sharp, and who would not stick at trifles in order to gain his ends. The papers which have been stolen from me, have therefore assuredly found their way into the possession of either Rigden or Woodfall—or perhaps both conjointly. It is of the utmost importance for me to recover them;—and I will give two thousand guineas to the person who shall restore them to me."

Florimel ceased speaking, and looked first at Carrotty Poll, then at the Gallows' Widow, in order to observe the impression which this liberal offer had made upon them. The former started with an actual paroxysm of avaricious feelings suddenly and powerfully excited; while the usually cold and passionless features of the latter instantaneously brightened up with an expression of vivid interest. Then the two women once more exchanged significant looks: but this time they were less furtive and more lingering, as much as to consult each other what reply should be made to the brilliant proposal and what course should be adopted.

"Well, do you think anything can be done in this business?" asked Florimel at length.

"Will your lordship leave the matter entirely in our hands?" demanded Carrotty Poll.

"Yes—with much pleasure, if you can hold out to me any prospect of success," was the immediate response.

"We will do all we can, my lord," rejoined Carrotty Poll: then, after a brief pause, she added, "For I have already a certain plan in my head. Of course your lordship does not care how the deeds are recovered, so long as they are restored to you?"

"How can I care what means are adopted to accomplish that aim?" cried the young nobleman. Have I not been scandalously robbed in this matter? Therefore if you choose to fight my enemies with the same weapons that they have employed against me, I shall not experience the slightest remorse."

"Then there is no more to be said upon the business—at least for the present," observed Carrotty Poll.

"Yes—we must have a description of the deeds," said the Gallows' Widow, who fancied that her companion in iniquity meditated a burglary in Rigden's house, through the agency of some of their numerous adherents and friends.

"No—I don't want any description at all," exclaimed the Big Beggarman's daughter, in her sharp vixenish tones. "You have no idea, Lizzy, what my present scheme is: but you shall know all by and bye. Don't think, however, for a moment that I mean to have Rigden's house broken open and robbed. *That* game won't do at any price. It might fail—or the wrong papers might be brought away—or the real ones may not be there at all: in a word, a burglary for such a purpose would have a thousand chances against its success, and might involve us all in trouble. No—the thing must be managed by stratagem—a good stratagem too;—and that scheme I have already got cut and dried in my own mind. Some weeks—perhaps months, may elapse before this scheme succeeds: but I will pledge my soul as to its triumph in the long run," added the young woman, with so strong an emphasis and such an evident conviction of the truth of what she was saying, that the flame of hope once more burnt brightly in Lord Florimel's breast.

"Well, my worthy creature," he said, in a flattering tone, "I leave myself entirely in your hands. The papers will not be wanted—or rather their loss can do no possible harm, for some months to come, inasmuch as the law's delays are numerous indeed. And now tell me whether you would like to receive an earnest of my liberal intentions with regard to both the matters that you have taken in hand?"

"You may give us a hundred pounds on account, my lord, if you will," said Carrotty Poll, her palm itching to feel the touch of the young nobleman's gold.

"A hundred pounds!" he exclaimed: "I will give you five hundred—because I am confident that you are sincere and that you will accomplish everything you have undertaken."

Lord Florimel accordingly counted down bank notes for the sum he had named; and the two women's eyes sparkled with joy as they contemplated the welcome pieces of "flimsy-paper." The young nobleman then took his leave; and wrapping himself well up in his capacious cloak, he sallied forth from the Beggar's Staff.

CHAPTER CLX.

THE UNKNOWN LADY ONCE MORE.

It was about eleven o'clock that night when Lord Florimel returned to his own mansion in Piccadilly. Rao was instantaneously in attendance upon him; and the moment he had conducted his master into the parlour where a cheerful fire was blazing in the grate and the table was spread for supper, he handed the young nobleman a letter.

"The person who brought this, requested your lordship's earliest attention to it," said the page.

"And who did bring it?" inquired Florimel, listlessly, as he threw himself into an arm-chair near the fire.

"A tall footman, my lord," was the response: "but I do not know in whose service he is."

"Ah! a tall footman?" echoed Florimel, now suddenly inspired with a sentiment of curiosity: and glancing at the letter, he observed that the address

was penned in precisely the same affected and artificial scrawl as that of the envelope which had contained the masquerade-ticket four or five days previously.

His first impulse was to throw the letter unopened into the fire and thereby offer up his feelings of mingled curiosity and tender interest as a sacrifice to his love for Pauline Clarendon: but a second thought reminded him that she had voluntarily, spontaneously, and deliberately released him from all allegiance towards her;—and, to speak the truth, he was precisely in one of those humours when a sense of loneliness and desolation prompts the individual to court any company that may afford a distraction from his gloomy meditations, or plunge into any adventure that may seem calculated to wean the mind from melancholy topics of thought.

He accordingly opened the letter and read the contents in the following manner:—

"The Unknown Lady requests an interview with the Lord Florimel. She would not so far forget her own dignity as to solicit this favour, after the cold and even insulting neglect with which her overtures for a meeting were treated by the Lord Florimel the other night: but it is of some importance to herself that she should have five minutes' conversation with his lordship as soon as possible. Should his lordship be absent when the bearer of this note calls at his lordship's mansion in Piccadilly, the same individual will return at the hour when it is probable that the Lord Florimel will be at home. The Unknown Lady therefore throws herself upon the Lord Florimel's generosity, and beseeches him to accompany her domestic whithersoever he may lead and under whatsoever circumstances of secrecy he may suggest."

"Did the bearer of this note inquire when I should return home?" demanded Florimel, as soon as he had read the contents of the missive.

"He did, my lord," replied Rao; "and I assured him that I expected your lordship home every moment."

"What farther observation did he make?"

"He said that he should take the liberty of returning at midnight precisely, for your lordship's answer."

"Did you notice what kind of a looking man he was?" demanded Florimel.

"He studiously averted his countenance, my lord, as he stood upon the front-door steps," replied Rao.

"How know you that this was *studiously* done?" asked Florimel, somewhat surprised at the observation.

"It struck me, my lord, that the man was desirous to conceal his features from observation," was the calm and unembarrassed response.

"Well—when he returns at twelve, tell him that I will accompany him at once," said Florimel, after a few moments' reflection;—"and then come and let me know of his arrival."

Rao bowed and quitted the room.

"Yes—I will grant the Unknown Lady this interview which she so earnestly solicits," thought Florimel within himself, as soon as the door had closed behind the sable page. "Not that I will yield to temptation or forget my vows to Pauline. No—all the blandishments of that voluptuous creature whom I am presently to meet, shall be vainly expended upon me: all her seductive wiles and amorous fascinations will find me only the more resolute in my resistance—only the more stoically determined in my anchoritism. And yet it would really serve Miss Pauline right if I *did* give her some good ground to be jealous,—since, for want of real motives, she flies to imaginary ones in order to pick a quarrel with me. But, no—I will not act so ungenerous a part: I will not play so treacherous a game. I love Pauline—love her devotedly; and I will remain true to my vows. At the same time it would be unhandsome in the extreme—ungentlemanly to a degree—uncourteous and cowardly in every sense of the word, to refuse the Unknown Lady the interview which she so earnestly desires. Besides, it will serve as a little distraction for me in my present mournful mood and unsettled position; and it will likewise afford me an opportunity of testing the strength of my affection for Pauline. Ah! cruel Pauline—if you only knew how great is the temptation which I am this night prepared to resist on your account, you would not continue estranged from me!"

And yet, while thus musing, Lord Florimel could not restrain his ardent imagination from retracing the path of those pleasures which he had once enjoyed in the society of the Unknown Lady, and which he had so graphically described to Lord Montgomery,—pleasures, the memory of which now made the blood run with a hotter glow in his veins, his cheeks flush with a deeper animation, and his pulse beat with a quicker continuity,—pleasures, the recollection of which had already more than half weaned him from his fealty towards Pauline, despite of the efforts which he used to persuade himself that he was fully competent to resist all temptation.

But, ah! reader, blame him not too severely—castigate him not too harshly with thy vituperation: for remember that he had no longer the same motive which rendered him strong to refuse and made him potent to resist when the Unknown's overtures were signified to him through the medium of the masquerade-ticket and the blue domino. *Then* he was in possession of the love and confidance of Pauline: *now* both were withdrawn. On *that* occasion he had naught to trouble his mind with care nor harass it with gloomy presentiment: but on *this* occasion he felt as if some friend were suddenly extending a hand to him at the moment when the solace of friendship became so highly necessary and so acceptably welcome.

He was still pondering upon the incident which had thus unexpectedly presented itself as a means of diversion for his troubled thoughts, when Rao entered the room to announce that the tall footman had returned.

Florimel immediately started from his seat—resumed his hat and cloak—and went out to the front door where the tall footman was standing in such a position that the broad brim of his hat completely shaded his countenance from the reflection of the hall-lamp.

"Lead on—I will follow you," said Lord Florimel, in a hasty whisper.

The tall footman accordingly moved rapidly away, proceeding along Piccadilly in the direction of Hyde Park,—Lord Florimel keeping close in his rear.

But Rao was likewise following at a distance—unperceived and unsuspected by either the tall footman or the young nobleman.

In a few minutes the corner of Hyde Park was gained; and the mysterious footman struck into

the enclosure. Just glancing round to assure himself that Lord Florimel was close behind, he continued his way at a rapid pace, until a dark equipage appeared at a little distance. The moon was shining with a feeble and sickly lustre: but there was light enough to enable Lord Florimel to observe that the vehicle was a barouche, of a sombre colour and with no armorial bearings upon the panels—that it was drawn by two dark horses—and that the countenance of the coachman, as he sate upon his box, was almost completely muffled up in a shawl neckerchief.

"Enter, my lord," said the tall footman, as he hurriedly opened the door of the carriage.

Florimel instantaneously obeyed the request thus made, although it sounded rather like a command that was imperiously given: but the impression of neither tone nor words dwelt upon the nobleman's mind more than an instant—for, on entering the barouche, he was immediately received in a pair of arms that snatched him to a heaving bosom, while a moist plump mouth, whence exhaled the most fragrant of breaths, simultaneously fastened itself upon his own lips.

The door was closed with promptitude—all was darkness within the vehicle—and, as the splendid animals whirled it rapidly away, Lord Florimel sank unresistingly into the warm and fervid embrace which had thus received him. Alas! poor Pauline, thou wast then forgotten indeed.

Meantime Rao had kept close enough behind his master and the tall footman so as never to lose sight of them for a single instant; and yet he had remained sufficiently aloof to prevent them from perceiving that any one was dogging their footsteps. The equipage was waiting beneath the shade of some trees in Hyde Park; and thus, favoured by that gloominess of locality as well as by his own dark apparel and sable complexion, the agile and wary youth was enabled to glide beneath the carriage just at the moment when the tall footman was opening the door for Florimel to jump in. Rao then clung with his arms and legs to the beam that passed under the barouche; and, retaining his hold there with the tenacity of a monkey clinging to a bough, he was whirled away along with the equipage.

We have already observed that the interior of the vehicle was quite dark—the blinds being drawn up; and thus Lord Florimel was as unable to obtain even a glimpse of his fair companion as he was on the former occasion. But no sooner did he feel her lips joining to his own in a long, impassioned, fervid caress—no sooner did he experience the warmth of her embrace and catch the murmurs of joy and gladness which escaped from her tongue during the intervals of those devouring kisses,—no sooner, too, did his hand encounter the uncovered, glowing bosom which was heaving against his chest,—than he immediately became aware that this was indeed the heroine of the night of love, mystery, and pleasure, the details of which he had recounted to Lord Montgomery.

"Gabriel, my beloved friend," murmured the lady at length, in that soft and fluid voice which was so familiar to his ear—because, if once heard, it could never be forgotten,—"are you angry with me for having adopted a stratagem to bring you back to my arms?"

"Angry!—Oh! who could be angry with you, truly enticeous?" exclaimed Florimel, his voice broken with a profound sigh of pleasure. "But what stratagem have you adopted?"

"That letter, which told you that some business of importance rendered an interview necessary," replied the lady.

"And such is not the fact?" said the young nobleman, interrogatively.

"No other motive save love—no other impulse save passion, prompted my conduct, Gabriel," whispered the lady, redoubling the fond ardour of her caresses and lavishing upon her companion blandishments that would have thrown the veriest anchorite into the delirium of a blissful intoxication.

"Dangerous as you are enchanting—omnipotent for mischief as you must be captivatingly beautiful!" exclaimed the young nobleman, his soul already exalted to an enthusiastic pitch;—and, as he alluded to the personal loveliness with which he supposed the fascinating unknown to be endowed, he passed his hand gently over her countenance, pausing as it were at every feature. "Yes—you are handsome—very handsome," he continued, in a musing tone: "your face is nobly formed—perfect in all its details;—your head is elegantly shaped—and your hair is of velvet softness. Then your neck—Ah! that is smooth as the fairest skin can be——"

"But I must not suffer you to pay me all the compliments and receive none in return," exclaimed the lady: then, as her own fair hand played caressingly with Lord Florimel's countenance, she said, "And you too, my Gabriel, are gloriously handsome——no, not gloriously—but femininely handsome—and I love you—oh! I love you, Gabriel—my own dear Gabriel!"

And as she gave utterance to these words with a sort of cannibal concentration of tone and feeling,—that is to say, with a fervid earnestness and a warmth of passion as if she could have devoured the object of her eulogy,—she strained him to her glowing breast—she lavished upon him the tenderest and the most fervid caresses—she seemed ready to abandon herself to him even to the extent of her immortal soul, were it possible, the same as on the former occasion she had with such a sensuous enthusiasm abandoned to him her person.

"And now, my beloved Gabriel," she murmured, as she lay in his arms panting with joy and palpitating with thrilling emotions,—"and now I must take you seriously and solemnly to task for treating me with such cold disdain the other night!"

"Ah! I know to what you allude, my charming friend," exclaimed Florimel: "but may I hope that you will not question me upon this point?"

"On the contrary, I must exact a full and faithful explanation," cried the lady. "For it is no slight nor venial offence which you committed upon that occasion," she continued, in a tone of good-natured raillery. "Remember, my dear Gabriel, that when we met and parted on a certain night fifteen or sixteen months ago, you besought me to accord you another and speedy interview. I promised that I would: but circumstances afforded me no opportunity until the other day. Then I conveyed to you, by means as significant as any that could be adopted, an overture for a renewal of our acquaintance—our friendship—our love: in a word, I gave you an appointment—the manner and the place being symbolized, or rather expressed, by the masquerade-ticket and the blue domino. And yet you availed

yourself not of that intimation: you treated me with indifference—with scorn—with disdain—with contempt;—and if I did not love you dearly—very dearly, Gabriel—yes, very dearly indeed," added the Unknown, while she bestowed several tender caresses upon the young nobleman,—"I should not have proved so unmindful of my own dignity as to have courted your society again. But I forgive you, Gabriel, for that instance of coldness and neglect,—I forgive you because I love you—and because I am certain that you would not intentionally and wilfully wound the feelings of one who is thus devotedly attached to you."

"No—not for worlds!" exclaimed Florimel: and even as he yielded himself up heart and soul to that whirlpool of sensations and feelings which now engulfed him, he experienced a sharp pang of remorse striking through his heart as the image of Pauline hovered amidst the confusion of his brain.

"Tell me, Gabriel—tell me," said the unknown syren, "wherefore you absented yourself from that masquerade?"

"Oh! if you would wrest the truth from me!" exclaimed Florimel, with a species of shudder as the image of Pauline was now brought back more vividly still to his memory.

"Tell me—tell me that truth, whatever it may be," murmured the lady, redoubling her caresses and literally endeavouring not only to overpower her companion with the ravishing ecstacies of her blandishments, but likewise to absorb as it were his whole soul in her own and thus render him entirely captive to her will—her sense—and her sentiment. "Explain to me the cause of your absence on that occasion, dearest Gabriel," she said with a voice full of irresistible sweetness and with a manner which, though utter darkness prevailed in the carriage, was nevertheless sensibly fraught with a coaxing charm of superlative seductiveness.

"Listen, then, my unknown friend," said Florimel. "I love a young lady—a certain Miss Pauline Clarendon—who is beautiful as an angel and jealous as a dragon;—and when I received the ticket and the domino the other day, I was basking in the sunshine of her favour—consequently I resisted the temptation held out by yourself."

"And now—has the aspect of your love undergone a change?" inquired the lady.

"Yes—for Pauline is angry with me, I know not wherefore," responded Florimel; "and indeed she has bade me think of her no more! Therefore, when I received your note this evening,—partially because I was miserable and required solace—and also somewhat because I felt it would be unkind and discourteous to a degree not to obey the desire specified in your letter,—for these reasons, I say, did I keep the present appointment."

"And now are you sorry that you have done so?" asked the unknown, in a voice that trembled as if with apprehension relative to what the response might be.

"No—I am *not* sorry—nor do I repent," exclaimed the young nobleman, nerving himself with that species of desperation which prompts the individual who commits an imprudence, a perfidy, or a crime, to plunge headlong into the tide of the enjoyment constituting the temptation and therein endeavour to drown memory—remorse—the image of the absent wronged one—and all the better feelings of the soul!

"Dearest, dearest Gabriel," murmured the lady her tone and manner full of the enthusiasm of mingled joy, passion, and triumph: "how delicious is it to receive such an assurance from your lips! But tell me,—Oh! tell me whether you have religiously kept my secret—that is to say, *our* secret—the secret of that adventure which brought us together fifteen months ago, and which is now renewed again to-night. Tell me, I say, whether you have maintained this secret inviolable——Oh! you tremble, Gabriel—your hand shakes in my own—and you draw yourself back with a species of embarrassment from my embrace! By these signs, then, do I know that you have not kept the seal of inviolability altogether upon your lips: and yet do not fancy that I am angry with you—for, after all, how little was there to tell which could possibly be fraught with any chance of discovery."

"Once—and once only, dearest friend," murmured Lord Florimel, in a tone of deep contrition, "have I opened my lips respecting that adventure. Solemnly and sacredly do I assure you that with the single exception to which I now allude, the adventure has been religiously treasured up in my bosom."

"And who was the confidant that you thus selected, Gabriel?" inquired the lady.

"A friend—a sincere, trustworthy, and valued friend of mine," was the answer,—"a man with whom I enjoy the fullest intimacy."

"But who is he?" asked the unknown.

"Lord Montgomery," replied Florimel. "Do you know him?—for of course you must have heard of him, no matter in what circle of society you move."

"Yes—I have heard of him—and I think I have seen him," said the lady, in a quiet manner. "And now tell me, Gabriel, what you did with the blue domino which I sent you."

"How is it possible that you can trouble yourself concerning a piece of masquerading trumpery?" cried Florimel, amazed at the question which had just been put to him.

"Simply because it may serve *you* for another occasion," was the immediate response of the ready-witted lady,—"should you take it into your head to visit the next masquerade and meet me there. Then, being aware of the precise character of the domino which you have already in your possession, I should know whom to accost in the crowded assembly."

"Yes, dearest lady—we will meet again, most assuredly," exclaimed Florimel, catching her in his arms: "and it shall be at a masquerade if you will. But the dress to which you allude cannot serve the purpose on any such future occasion, inasmuch as I caused it to be destroyed within a few minutes after I received it."

"You caused it to be destroyed?" said the lady, in so peculiar a tone of mingled incredulity and surprise that Florimel actually started at the seriousness which she thus appeared to be attaching to an affair fraught with so little consequence in his estimation.

"I pledge you my honour most solemnly—most sacredly," he exclaimed, "that I gave the blue domino to one of my dependants with orders for its instantaneous destruction; and I have no reason to believe that my commands were disobeyed. And if you ask me, dearest lady, wherefore I took so extraordinary a step, I will candidly explain it by the assurance that it was to place the object of

temptation beyond my reach. But wherefore do you attach so much importance to these trivial details?—of what avail is the fate of a paltry blue domino to you?"

"Because I wish to study all the points of your character, my Gabriel," was the ready response; "and there are no better means than by thus pursuing a thread of explanations connected with the tender passion. I now perceive, therefore, that you are fervently devoted to Miss Pauline Clarendon, and that you would have remained faithful to her image had she not outraged you by her unfounded suspicions. I even see that rather than trust entirely to your own strength of mind in your late course of allegiance to that lady, you adopted the prudential plan of destroying the garment which might even at the last moment have proved an irresistible temptation. Think you, then, my dear Gabriel, that I am unmindful of all the truths which these little incidents teach me concerning your character? No: I shall treasure them up—I shall ponder upon them—and they will instruct me how to know you better and understand you thoroughly in the long run. And now answer me one question which, being so very trivial, I must candidly attribute to its right source—indeed, to no loftier feeling than a mere passing sentiment of curiosity."

"Speak, lady—put your question and I will answer it, if possible," said the young nobleman.

"Are you certain that the blue domino was destroyed?" inquired the lady. "Do you feel quite convinced that the servant to whom you entrusted the commission, performed it faithfully?"

"I am morally certain that such was the case," returned Florimel: "but I cannot undertake to affirm that the point is beyond all doubt. At the same time I recollect full well that I ordered my black page—a new dependant recently introduced into my service—to destroy the blue domino; and he could have no possible object in disobeying my orders. But surely some motive more important than a transitory curiosity, has dictated these questions?"

"No—I can assure you, my dear Gabriel——"

At this moment the carriage stopped;—and the lady, hastily throwing a scarf over Florimel's head, tied it round his neck in such a manner that it could not possibly shift, much less come off, of its own accord.

"You mean me to accompany you, then, dearest, to the boudoir of darkness, love and mystery?" he murmured in a tone tremulous with varied feelings,—the hope of pleasure struggling against a sentiment of remorse—the consciousness of approaching elysium warring with the pangs which a sense of the deepest perfidy towards Pauline excited in his soul.

"Yes—I mean to introduce you thither once more," answered the lady, in her soft dulcet tones: "that is to say, if you be agreeable to accompany me," she added, with a sudden accent of restraint.

"Oh! do not doubt it, my charming and adorable friend," exclaimed Florimel. "The net has ensnared me—I am a prey to the most irresistible of fascinations—the spell of the enchantress is upon me—and I yield, I yield!! Alas, poor Pauline!" he murmured, his voice suddenly sinking to an inaudible note as these last words were thrown up from his very heart, despite of himself.

At this instant the door of the vehicle was opened by the tall footman—and the lady, having covered her own face with a thick black veil, assisted Lord Florimel to alight. She then unfastened a door in a garden-wall; and while the footman, having shut up the carriage again, was re-ascending to his seat behind, Rao slipped from underneath the vehicle and glided rapidly and noiselessly as a snake into the shade of that garden-wall. The vehicle drove quickly away: while the lady and Lord Florimel passed into the garden, the former stopping for an instant to fasten the door behind them.

As a matter of course Rao was unable to follow through that means of ingress to the enclosure. But he unhesitatingly clambered up the wall the moment the garden-door was closed;—and in the twinkling of an eye he stood upon the other side. Then, cautiously and noiselessly threading his way amongst the maze of evergreens which thronged the grounds and thus favoured his progress, he was enabled by the partial moonlight to keep in view his master and the lady as they proceeded along a gravel-walk, the latter holding the former by the hand and acting as guide.

Little leisure had Rao to contemplate the building which stood in the midst of the grounds whither he had thus audaciously introduced himself: for in about a couple of minutes the lady and Florimel paused at a low door belonging to that spacious edifice.

At this moment a cloud suddenly obscured the moon—throwing all that portion of the building into the deepest shade. With a boldness equalled only by the readiness of wit and the presence of mind that prompted the proceeding, Rao glided forward—crept rapidly and noiselessly along the wall—and reached the immediate vicinity of the low door just at the instant that the lady opened it.

"Now give me your hand once more, Gabriel," said the Unknown; "and I will lead you to that chamber which you yourself have denominated as the boudoir of darkness, love, and mystery."

Rao failed not to catch this observation: indeed, he was standing close by the lady as she uttered it—and the word "darkness," as applied to the boudoir, instantaneously confirmed him in the design which he had already formed and which he was indeed now waiting to carry into execution. This was nothing less than to follow the lady and the nobleman to the very end and issue of their adventure; and when he heard enough to satisfy him that the chamber whither they were about to repair was veiled in darkness, he was more resolute than ever in making the attempt already conceived.

The opportunity was at hand! For the door stood open—all was dark within—and the lady had turned round towards Florimel as she addressed to him the observation last chronicled. The moon was totally concealed at that moment—the young noble was blindfolded—and over the countenance of the lady herself did a black veil hang, thus deepening even for her the obscurity which wrapt all things beneath the overhanging wall of the edifice. Every circumstance was therefore favourable at that particular instant for Rao's scheme;—and, with the serpent-like property of rapid and noiseless gliding which seemed peculiar to him, the sable youth slid in a stooping posture over the

MRS. FITZHERBERT.

threshold, into the building. His arms were immediately thrown out and swept cautiously around: and his hands encountered first the massive balusters of an antique staircase — then the steps themselves, covered with a thick carpetting. To ascertain these points was the work of one moment: to stand aside, gather himself up into the smallest compass, and hold his very breath while the lady and Florimel passed him by, were the incidents of the next moment.

The unknown paused to close and fasten the door; and she then conducted Florimel up the staircase. Rao followed—the pitchy darkness favouring his design, and the thick carpet of the stairs adding to the security of his tread. With his hands he felt his way: and keen as the scent of an Indian on the trail of an enemy, did he maintain between those whom he was following and himself a distance precisely suitable to his purpose, —neither approaching too near so as to incur the chance of running upon their heels, nor yet getting so far in the rear as to be unable to catch them up in time to enter the boudoir of darkness, love, and mystery, along with them.

And this latter aim was accomplished! Yes—no sooner did the unknown lady and Florimel stop short in the passage to which the stairs led, than Rao was on all fours at their very feet;—then, the instant that the door was thrown open, the sable page glided in so stealthily—so silently—so speedily, that no spectre could have passed by more imperceptibly;—and thus ere the door was even closed again and secured within, the lithe and subtle Rao was ensconsed behind the heavy window-curtains of that chamber *where the atmosphere was warm and perfumed!*

CHAPTER CLXI.

HORROR!

We must break off the thread of our narrative for a short space, while we record an episode of horror that characterised the same night, and the same hour of the night, as the incidents contained in the preceding chapter.

For it was while the dark-coloured barouche was yet rolling along from Hyde Park towards its place of destination, that a man was advancing stealthily down a narrow lane skirting one of the churchyards on the northern suburb of London.

This man was roughly dressed in the garb of a sailor: but the broad brim of his hat shaded a countenance the expression of which no mortal language can properly delineate. That countenance was ghastly pale: but the eyes were wild and bloodshot—the lips were cracked and bleeding, as if with a horrible thirst—and the workings of the features were of a nature that seemed to denote an awful struggle in the mind between a poignant anguish and an infernal ferocity. Agony and horror were combined in that dread expression which was stamped upon the man's ghastly countenance;—and as every step brought him nearer and nearer to the gate of the churchyard, his anguish seemed to grow more intense—his horror more profound,—and the tempest which raged in his soul, became the more excruciating—the more awful in its violence—the more tremendous in its absorbing potency.

It seemed as if the irresistible hand of some infernal destiny was hurrying the wretch along to the performance of a task whence his soul, appalled and horror-stricken, shrank with a fearful loathing. That agony which convulsed his countenance and which bathed him in perspiration, was the awful index of a frightful struggle waged by his mind against the doom that he was thus obeying: it was the better nature of the man battling with the hellish instincts of the fiend.

Under the rough jacket which hung loosely upon him, the man carried a spade. Once or twice he paused in the midst of the lane—tossed the implement away from him with a movement of the deepest disgust—and then appeared to experience a feeling of satisfaction at having thus rid himself of a thing which he evidently regarded with as much horror and aversion as if it were a coiling, writhing, clammy serpent.

But scarcely had he cast the shovel away, when his destiny seized upon him again—grasped him as with an invisible hand of iron—forced him to stoop down and pick up the implement once more—and then hurried him along the lane, despite of every wild, desperate, maddening effort which the man made to throw off the thraldom that some supernal and indomitable influence thus exercised over him.

The moon was shining faintly and feebly;—and on reaching the churchyard gate, the man paused. He leant against the railing—he buried his face in his hands—he wept bitterly, bitterly. Profound sobs convulsed him—as if the very fountains of his heart's agony were completely broken up;—and the strong muscular form of that man writhed like a stricken reptile beneath the invisible influence that had fastened its accursed spell upon him!

Yes—the moon was shining faintly and feebly: and the tombs in the churchyard wore a ghastly aspect. Grey in the sickly gleaming appeared the old church itself—the windows shining with a leaden dimness; and deep was the shade in the arched entrance and in the angles and nooks formed by the projecting buttresses. So black and dark, too, were the intervals between the tombstones in the cemetery, that it seemed as if every one was a yawning abyss which had opened, and that the entire churchyard was an assemblage of innumerable gulfs the edges whereof were pinnacled with the monuments of the dead.

And solemn—profoundly solemn was the silence which reigned in that place. The stillness was indeed that of death; and the night air was fraught with the icy coldness of the tomb. 'Twas a silence only too well calculated to enhance the desolation of heart experienced by any homeless outcast and wandering wretch who might happen to pause for a moment there to lean against the gate and rest his weary limbs;—and it was a chill that could not fail to pierce into the very marrow of his bones.

And over the gate bent the man whom a hideous destiny seemed to have impelled thither:—over the gate he bent, looking round upon the churchyard with eyes the haggard wildness and despairing frenzy of which were further proofs of the poignant anguish that wrung his soul. He clung to the gate—and yet he would have been overjoyed to hasten away: with an iron tenacity did he seem to grasp those railings—and yet he would have given worlds, had he possessed them, to be enabled to throw off the spell that was upon him and flee with precipitation from that spot! But he was not his own master: his better inclinations urged him in one direction—his ferocious instincts impelled him in another;—the intelligence of the man was warring against the unnatural sensation of the fiend;—and the latter influence was triumphant!

Yes—a spell of a tremendous and appalling nature was now upon the unhappy man;—and, with convulsing limbs—a form bathed from head to foot in the sweat of his agony—eyes glaring with ferocious wildness—features working horribly—and foam oozing from the tongue and speckled with the blood that came from the cracked lips,—in this wretched, unnatural, awful plight it was that the man suddenly climbed the gate and leapt over into the churchyard.

And now, instead of either keeping in the path or striking off into the intervals between the tombs and the graves, the man studiously avoided touching the ground at all with his feet: but he walked from stone to stone—stepping easily from one to another when they were close, and leaping the intervening space with a sure foot and an unerring dexterity when they were farther apart. From time to time he paused and listened: then, if the sound of a footstep in the lane happened to meet his ear, he would throw himself flat upon some monumental stone and there lie until all was still again. But if it were the barking of a dog which his ear caught, a frightful trembling would come over him as he flung his form on the nearest horizontal stone;—and there would he lie in convulsive writhings until the menacing sound was heard no more!

In all and every case, however, was he careful to avoid touching the ground with his feet. From

tomb to tomb—from stone to stone, would he pass or leap with celerity: but such was his evident horror of even suffering his foot to brush against a blade of the grass that grew between the graves, that if ever he happened to stumble while thus strangely making his way through the churchyard, an ejaculation of fright would escape his lips and his whole frame would tremble with a mortal terror.

And all this time the man hugged the spade beneath the rough garment which he wore. But if now and then he fancied that amidst the twilight gloom he beheld a human shape gliding stealthily along in the shade of the wall or through the labyrinth of the tombs,—or if his disordered imagination deluded him with the idea that a head was suddenly thrust up from behind one of the perpendicular stones,—then how every nerve and fibre in the frame of the unhappy wretch thrilled with excruciating apprehension—how every vein tingled with the blood that suddenly ran like lightning there, but only to flow cold and icy to the heart!

But had this man any fixed purpose in thus wandering over the graves, making the memorials of the dead his stepping-stones and carefully avoiding the cold clay which covered the coffins or lay between the resting-places of perished humanity? And in thus pursuing his path, had he any definite spot in view?—was there any special destination which he was endeavouring to reach?

We know not. Certain, however, it is that all on a sudden the man paused—not on account of any sound filling him with terror or making him anxious to escape observation—but in apparent obedience to some instinctive feeling telling him that *this was the place*, or under the guidance of some spell that made him halt by its own mystic influence in the same way that it at other times urged him on.

And the spot where the man had thus halted was where the mound of a newly-made grave appeared. The large lumps of damp clay were heaped rudely and negligently up: no trouble had been bestowed upon shaping the grave—no turf had been set over the elevation which marked the resting-place of a new victim to the maw of all-destroying Death. Ah! doubtless it was some poor, friendless creature—male or female—that had been buried there;—and the sexton's fee was too small to induce him to bestow any care upon a task for which he was so indifferently remunerated!

This grave lay near a flat tombstone;—and kneeling upon the latter, the man felt carefully—slowly—and cautiously all round and about that newly-made grave. To this portion of his task did he devote upwards of five minutes,—not contenting himself with merely passing his hand everywhere *near* and *over* the grave, but likewise examining the spot with keen and penetrating looks.

At length his finger encountered some object from which his touch recoiled at first, while a cold tremor passed over his frame and the perspiration burst forth once more upon his brow: but, speedily recovering his presence of mind, he again felt cautiously and delicately for that object which his finger had ere now encountered. Again he touched it—he raised it gently up: it was only a wire which stretched over that spot, and which passed through the roughly-piled mound of damp clay that marked the new-made grave.

Yes—it was only a wire: but how delicately—how cautiously—how timidly did the man touch it. Simply raising it half an inch from the ground—neither pulling it one way nor the other—equally careful not to shake it, he suffered it to lie over the finger which he had thrust underneath it. Then, taking a pair of scissors from his pocket, he cut the wire in twain: and the moment this was done, he appeared to breathe more freely.

Following the course of the wire in one direction from the point where it was cut, the man clipped it asunder again at a distance of about three yards;—and then, following the wire in the other direction, he treated it in a similar manner. Thus the pieces of wire that now remained in the vicinity of the grave, were isolated from the rest; and the man, tearing them up without fear, twisted them round his hand into a skein or ball, and hurled them to a distance.

And now, as if seized with a sudden paroxysm of activity, he grasped his spade and began to dig at the grave as if he had a particular task to perform in a given time, life or death depending upon the issue. And to the accomplishment of this labour did the spell-struck mortal strain his whole nerve and fibre,—dashing the spade down deep into the soil—tossing up the huge lumps with a marvellous speed,—in fine, hollowing out the grave much more speedily than a practised sexton could possibly have done it.

The perspiration poured off him like large drops of rain: the glow of heat into which the toil threw him, appeared to animate him with increased ardour,—heightening into a perfect fever of the blood, and expanding into a delirium of the brain. Madly, madly did he ply the spade: his efforts were almost superhuman. Never was implement worked with such marvellous rapidity—never was grave hollowed out with such wondrous speed. A horrible enthusiasm seemed to be inspiring the wretch in his loathsome work: he grew joyous—happy—intoxicated with triumph;—and the nearer his labour brought him to the end of his task, the more delirious became his feelings—the more maddening the excitement of his soul.

At length the spade struck upon the coffin;—and an ejaculation of frenzied ecstacy burst from the man's lips, as if that dull, hollow, sinister sound had just made the most delicious music to his ears. Through the deep obscurity that prevailed in the depth of the grave, his eyes shone with the ferocious and lurid glare of a tiger crouched in a cavern or concealed in a jungle;—and as those terrible looks flashed through the gloom, they might have been taken for corpse-lights shedding their ominous beams over the spot where a hideous desecration was in progress.

The spade had speedily cleared away all the soil which lay upon the lid of the coffin; and now the man addressed himself to the task of raising the coffin itself. This was speedily accomplished: for the wretch's arms appeared to be made of iron—capable of dashing aside any obstacle—competent to the performance of every task. Soon therefore was the coffin raised to a perpendicular position in the grave: and when once it was thus lifted up on one end, the man had no trouble in dragging it forth from the grave.

Surely it was a giant's arm that thus handled the coffin as if it were a thing of no weight!—or else, surely some fiend must have lent his power to that wretch whose mischief or whose vengeance, whose malignity or whose avarice, was now about to be gratified by the complete desecration of the dead's last home!

For at a moment when the moon was shining more brightly than it had hitherto done this night,—when the stillness was more solemn around,—and when the old church stood out in a finer relief against the deep inky sky beyond,—at this moment was it that the man tore off the lid of the coffin which he had exhumed.

And this portion of his task caused but little trouble: for it was a poor, miserable coffin—a paltry box of thin deal boards hurriedly nailed together and daubed over with a single coat of black paint. For a moment the man seemed disappointed, and half inclined to throw back the coffin into the grave and cover it with the soil again: but this hesitation vanished almost immediately—and the diabolical instinct which impelled the wretch, once more became dominant.

Away went the lid, then—the shroud was torn aside—and the rays of the moon shone out with all their power at that moment upon the countenance of the corpse.

But, O God! what a hideous ejaculation burst from the lips of the man as his eyes fell upon the marble features thus exposed to view. Staggering back, he was on the point of falling into the grave beneath the weight of the sudden consternation which had seized upon him: but, with a new and desperate impulse, he sprang forward—he fell upon his knees by the side of the coffin—he steadied himself so as to contemplate the countenance of the corpse with an earnest scrutiny—and thus did he remain, the living looking into the face of the dead, for upwards of a minute.

And in the space of that minute what varied thoughts flashed through the brain of the monster-man,—appalling fears lest the suspicion which had struck him should prove correct—wild hopes that imagination had deceived him,—then a horrible anxiety to receive a confirmation of these hopes, or else to know the worst,—until at length he could neither hope nor doubt any longer: for the suspicion *was* confirmed—the features were *those* which they had struck him to be—the marble countenance, so serene in death, was the same which he had loved and caressed in life.

Then, with a wild shriek and an unearthly yell, did the wretch spring from his knees: then, with another and still more rending outburst of mortal anguish, did he throw up his arms in mingled horror and despair;—and, as it was precisely at this moment that the moon became all on a sudden obscured with a cloud, the miserable man fancied that the darkness of hell was closing in upon him—and, with a long hideous moan, he sank down on his knees again.

His hands were clasped—but his arms hung down like those of the dead. Not a moan—not a sigh now escaped his lips. He was motionless—speechless. But thoughts of appalling contexture were filling his brain with harrowing sensations, as if scorpions were revelling there. Unnerved and physically paralysed was he by the fearfulness of the scene in which he was playing one part and the dead another, with the spectral churchyard as the theatre of the infernal drama!

His tongue clave to the roof of his mouth with a deadly thirst: and a mortal terror now seized upon him as the night put forth all its inky blackness to veil both moon and stars and draw its sable curtain down unto the very lowest confines of the horizon. Slowly did a sense of approaching lethargy steal upon him: his form, as he knelt on the humid soil, gave way gradually like an image of snow which is melting at the base;—and he eventually sank down by the side of the coffin, deprived of consciousness and lost to every earthly feeling!

An hour elapsed, during which this mysterious swoon lasted—the entranced living slumbering by the side of the irrevocably departed dead!

Suddenly the man awoke—and as suddenly he started up. Springing to his feet, he threw wild and horrified looks around. The moon and stars were now shining forth once more,—shining upon the church, the tombs, and the marble countenance of the corpse! Thus was the wretch enabled to discover where he was: and that discovery itself was a mingled agony and terror.

In the space of a single moment—a moment which carried a myriad incidents through his brain as a rocket with all its out-shooting sparks and countless coruscations sweeps through the air,—in that brief space, we say, did he live over again with a frightfully vivid distinctness every incident and every thought of the tremendous sacrilege which he had ere now achieved towards the resting-place of the dead!

Yes—and amidst those horrifying reminiscences which thus swept through his brain, was *one* which rent him anew with unspeakable agony—which concentrated in itself all the anguish of the rack and the most fiendish implements of the torture-rooms of old—and which made him bend, and writhe, and convulse as if he were flayed alive!

Then, as this intolerable anguish at length found means of giving expression to itself in words, he sank down once more upon his knees by the side of the coffin, exclaiming—"My wife! my wife!"

And he burst into a flood of the bitterest weeping.

Yes: it was his wife—his own wife—whom the monster-man had thus exhumed,—that wife of whose death he was ignorant—whom he had hoped to meet again in the land of the living—but whom he had thus encountered face to face in the cold damp realm of the dead!

Those tears relieved him. The nature which had been changed by awful influences into a demon-like ferocity, was softened: the disposition which no ordinary causes had converted into a morbid and loathsome brutality, was touched. Over the coffin he threw himself—upon the marble features of the dead he printed his caresses and dropped his tears;—and the kisses were burning with the memory of ancient love, and the tears were scalding with the anguish and woe of the present moment.

And, O cruel contrast!—cold, cold as the grave whence that stiff, stark form had been snatched, was the countenance whereon those kisses were fastened and those tear-drops rained down;—and the man murmured, as he paused and gazed steadfastly on the features of the corpse, "Thou didst perish through starvation! Yes—it is too apparent—for thy cheeks must have been fleshless and

sunken even before death laid his finger upon them! And moreover this is a pauper's coffin: there's no possibility of mistaking about *that!* Even into the grave does Misery pursue its victim!"

The man stopped and remained silent for upwards of a minute, during which he still kept his eyes fixed upon the countenance of the dead.

"But thou shalt be revenged, my poor murdered wife," he resumed at length. "Yes—the atrocious system under which the poor of this country live and die, hath murdered thee! Thou art one of the myriad million victims whom that system hath already sent, starved or broken-hearted, to untimely graves. Oh! curses—curses—hell's curses upon such a system! But thou shalt be revenged, I repeat—yes, by the living God! thou shalt be revenged! For I will prove a terror to society—to *that* society whose system has driven me to despair. The deity made me a man: 'tis the world which has made me a monster. And a monster will I remain—performing the deeds of one—carrying horror into the bosom of this society whose outcast I am—striking terror into the soul of that community which cherishes a few favoured ones so fondly and leaves the millions to starve—to rot—to die! And our little ones—Oh! I will seek them out—I will find them," exclaimed the man, continuing to apostrophise the corpse in a tone of concentrated wildness mingled with a savage triumph. "It will not be a difficult task: either grovelling in the workhouse—or perishing on a door-step—or crouched up in a street-corner—or else perhaps in a felon's goal, shall I find them! Yes—those are the places for the outcast working-man to look for his lost children," continued the unhappy being, his voice now expressing a penetrating bitterness: "those are the receptacles into which English civilization thrusts the innocent, unoffending, famishing babes of the poor! O God—how long shall this system last?—how long—how long?"

And covering his face with his hands as he knelt by the side of the coffin, the doomed wretch remained for upwards of a minute absorbed in the profoundest reverie.

Suddenly he started up. A last kiss he imprinted upon the countenance of the corpse—a last tear he dropped—and a last look threw on the marble features: then, as if hurried along by a frantic desire to restore the coffin to its place and the grave to its propriety with all possible despatch, he addressed himself to the task with all his zeal and all his energy.

Carefully however did he resign that pauper-coffin to its last home: and when it was once more lodged at the bottom of the grave, he threw back the earth with an incredible quickness. In half-an-hour the labour was completed—the rising mound of the grave was remodelled with care—and the man, shouldering his spade, looked grimly around him.

No human form was visible—no eyes met his own. The silver light of the moon and stars was now shining serenely—*too* serenely for such a world of oppression, injustice, turpitude, and woe!

Once more mounting upon the tombstones, the monster-man took his departure from the churchyard in the same way that he had entered it;—and on gaining the lane in safety, he appeared to breathe with a comparative ease and freedom that he had not known for some hours past.

We shall not accompany him farther upon the present occasion; neither shall we inquire whither he himself is going—nor who he is—nor how he came to be the victim of so appalling a doom as that which hurried him on to the hideous proceedings of this dread night of churchyard desecration! No—we shall not now stop to examine into all this: but the reader may rest assured that he will soon fall in with this strange and terrible being once more—and then perhaps——

——But let us not anticipate aught of the horrors which we may be called upon to reveal concerning the monster-man.

CHAPTER CLXII

LORD FLORIMEL AND THE UNKNOWN SYREN.

RETURN we now to the boudoir of love, darkness, and mystery,—that chamber with the perfumed atmosphere, the genial warmth, and the luxurious furniture, to which Florimel was thus introduced a second time.

The sable page, be it remembered, was concealed in that room—his presence being utterly unsuspected and undreamt of on the part of his noble master and that lady whose wantonness had recourse to such strange expedients in order to blend self-gratification with safety.

And upon the sofa which stood near the table, was this impassioned woman reclining in the arms of her paramour of a few hours;—and, although his eyes were unable to penetrate through the Cimmerian darkness of that chamber, yet did his fancy—his ardent, glowing, and fervid fancy—depict all the charms of his companion, as, now half-naked, and intoxicated with love, she pressed her voluptuous form against his own. With the eager eyes of his imagination he sought as it were to trace her entire person through the darkness,—to finish that exciting picture of which his sensations already furnished him with so many delicious particulars,—until his impassioned fancy could conceive all that was tempting and overpoweringly seductive in the contours of that fine person which was abandoned so completely to his embrace. He saw her, then, with his mental vision,—he saw her, with the burning looks of his imagination,—half-divested of her apparel—glowing as a Bacchanal, and amorous as a Bayadere—her long, glossy, silken hair flowing over the shoulders of such fluid shape and so plump and warm to the touch—her eyes half closing, her cheeks flushing, and her lips moist and red as they bestowed and received devouring caresses—her bosom heaving, with protracted sighs of pleasure, like the long slow swell of the ocean after a storm—her white arms thrown up and embracing his neck, with the hands joined behind his head—and her whole person yielding to the delicious langour and the sensuous abandonment of the ardours of love!

All this did the young nobleman fancy—or rather, in this manner did his imagination enable him to complete the glowing picture of what he already felt or knew. But in reality he could see not that woman who even in the darkness was able to assert the power of a fascination superior to even the most lascivious looks: but he could feel her splendid form as it vibrated to his pressure—

nis hand could wander freely over all its rich contours—and the effect was the same as if from her person there exhaled a fragrance which stole upon the senses with the influence of a delicious inebriation. Oh! irresistible indeed was the power of that intoxicating perfume: and the image of Pauline was as completely drowned in the cup of ambrosia of which he was now drinking so deeply, as ever the memory of the bacchanalian reveller was steeped in the oblivion of the brimming bowl.

And all this time, shrouded in the same impenetrable darkness which veiled the Unknown Lady from the eyes of her paramour, was Rao concealed in the boudoir of love and mystery!

"Dearest Gabriel," said the mistress of that voluptuous retreat, at length breaking a silence which had lasted for a considerable time, but during which the amorous dalliance had not ceased,—"dearest Gabriel, you know that I love you—otherwise I should not have sought this second interview with you. Tell me, Gabriel—do you think that I love you?"

"Yes, dearest lady—I am certain that you must have an affection for me," responded the young nobleman, upon whose lips the ardour of her caresses yet seemed to glow and in whose veins the transfusion of her own impassioned feelings was yet burning.

"It is indeed true, my Gabriel, that I love you," said the Unknown, in the deepest pathos, and most moving tones of her fluid voice: "and it is because I love you that I am anxious to afford you any proof of this affection—any proof, I mean, that lies within my power."

"You are kind-hearted and generous, my sweet friend," said Florimel: "but the only favour you can possibly show me is the disclosure of your name and the revelation of your countenance."

"Not now—not now," exclaimed the lady, lavishing upon her paramour the tenderest caresses as if for the purpose of coaxing him away from a topic which displeased her. "But the time may not be far distant when I shall be enabled to place that amount of confidence in you, Gabriel——"

"Ah! think not, my beautiful companion," interrupted the young nobleman, "that I am influenced by any sentiment of idle curiosity. No: I should not have made the slightest allusion to the avowal of your name, had I reflected for another moment—because it is only your countenance which I wish revealed. I care not who you may be: for I am confident that you are handsome—splendidly handsome! Oh! such frenetic passions as these which burn in your bosom can only be associated with a loveliness well adapted to inspire the same in return!"

"You shall gaze upon my countenance soon, Gabriel—you shall know who I am—you shall become the depositor of all my secrets in due time," murmured the mysterious syren, as she pressed herself more closely to her noble paramour. "But in the meantime tell me if there be anything which I can do to testify my love towards you and rivet your friendship—if it be impossible to win *your* love in return! Tell me, Gabriel, whether my fortune can serve you: for I am rich—very rich—and cheerfully would I place a large portion of my wealth at your disposal."

"Generous-hearted friend—as liberal as you are loving," said the young nobleman, straining her the more closely to his breast,—"I return you a thousand thanks for your proposals: but I have no need to avail myself of them. For I also am rich, as perhaps you are aware—indeed you must be, since you are more or less acquainted with me——"

"Ah! my beloved Gabriel," murmured the lady, in a tone trembling with emotion,—"I know that you are rich now; but is not your fortune menaced?—is not your position threatened?"

Florimel started with a convulsive paroxysm as the lady breathed those questions in his ears: for who could she possibly be, that she was thus intimate with his most private affairs?—who was she, that the important secrets of his present position were so fully known to her?

"How learnt you these circumstances?" he demanded, after a long pause and in a voice which was ominously changed.

"Do not question me upon that head, Gabriel," said the lady. "Even were you to know who I am, you would not glean from such knowledge the source of my present information concerning the posture of your affairs. And if I have ere now alluded to them, it is because I love you, Gabriel—because I feel deeply, deeply interested in all that concerns you—and because I may perhaps be enabled to render you a service in this matter."

"Oh! how mysterious art thou, incomprehensible being!" exclaimed the young nobleman: then, bending his face down to her own, he covered the warm cheeks and the moist lips with devouring kisses. "Surely thou art some creature of a grade superior to that of ordinary mortals," he murmured, in a tone of mingled compliment and gratitude: "perhaps some fairy who hath taken a fancy to so humble an individual as myself?—perhaps some demi-goddess, descended from your empyrean throne to teach the pleasures of paradise to an earthly lover! Oh! my unknown charmer—my mysterious friend,—comprehensible in nothing save the transcendent witchery of thy seductiveness and the irresistible allurement of thy fascinations,—how wonderfully is my spirit drawn towards thee by gratitude—by admiration—by a sense of elysian enjoyment—almost by a feeling of love!"

But as Florimel suffered these last words to fall murmuringly from his lips, his heart smote him with a severe and poignant pang: for the image of Pauline was instantaneously conjured up to his mental view. And in order to flee away as it were from the deeply mournful looks of silent reproach which the image of that fair being appeared to be fixing upon him, the faithless Florimel wound his arms still more completely around the half-naked form of the Unknown Lady;—and plunging as it were into the absorbing tide of the continuous and almost frenzied caresses which she now lavished upon him, he forgot Pauline—he forgot his vows, his pledges, his grief at her late conduct, and all,—everything did he forget, while abandoning himself to the transports of the present occasion!

"Thou art adorable, dearest lady," murmured Florimel, after a long pause. "Oh! promise me that we shall meet soon again! But wherefore should we separate at all? Surely you must be your own mistress as I am my own master," continued the young noble, hurried along by the infatuation excited by all the influences which were now operating upon his susceptible nature,—the sense of ineffable enjoyment—the mystery which enveloped

alike the companion and the place of his pleasures—the relief which his feelings, wounded as they were by the conduct of Pauline, now experienced in the fulest society of his amorous Unknown—and the generous proposals which she had made to place her fortune at his command.

"What do you mean, Gabriel?" she inquired, in a low tone that was still trembling with sensations of bliss mellowed into a voluptuous languor. "Supposing that you were your own master, which you are not—and supposing that I avowed myself my own mistress, as I really am,—then what would you have me infer?"

"Before I answer you, mysterious being," said the young nobleman, "tell me wherefore I am not my own master."

"Because you love Pauline Clarendon," responded the lady with something like the bitterness of a jealous rivalry in her tone: "and you confessed that much to me ere now, while we were journeying hither in the carriage."

"But you are charming enough, as I am confident you are sufficiently handsome also, to wean the least fickle heart from the object of its adoration elsewhere," murmured Lord Florimel, scarcely knowing what he said, so intoxicated was he with the feelings of bliss that enwrapt all his senses, and so completely was he enthralled by the magic of the seductiveness and the luscious wantonness of the caresses which were brought to bear upon him.

"Then do you mean to assure me that it is possible you can ever forget Pauline Clarendon and transfer your love to me?" asked the Unknown, with the breathless anxiety of suspense in her musical voice—while at the same time Florimel felt her heart palpitate rapidly and violently beneath the glowing bosom which he was pressing.

"By heaven! I am almost tempted to swear that I love thee already," exclaimed Florimel. "Oh! if I could only see thy countenance, and if it should prove as handsome as I have in imagination depicted it,—then, oh! then thy triumph would be indeed complete—thy victory would be accomplished, irresistible syren that thou art!"

"I will *not* reveal my countenance to thee yet, Gabriel," was the response, delivered in a mild but firm tone. "Nevertheless, I can assure thee that it is handsome—very handsome—as handsome as thou thyself hast imagined it to be! There—even now as thy hand playeth caressingly with my hair, thou canst tell that it is long, luxuriant, and glossy. Now pass that hand over my forehead, and thou canst perceive that it is broad, smooth, and as if polished. My cheeks are plump and yet soft;—and thou may'st judge whether they could glow thus warmly, unless the hues of a vigorous health were upon them. Then my teeth—thou canst feel that they are even in nature's arrangement, and perfect in number: not one is deficient—and thou may'st judge whether such teeth must not be of pearly whiteness and spotless purity. And my breath—oh! thou hast already drunk it in as if it were fragrant——"

"Yes—balmy as the breath of May, when the primroses and the violets are appearing," murmured Florimel, lulled as it were into such a voluptuous languor that he would have made no effort to resist the syren even if she had endeavoured to steal from him his immortal soul, were such a theft possible.

"Then you are fully convinced that I must be as beautiful as your imagination has already depicted me?" continued the unknown charmer, whose seductive influence was subtle as a poison circulating rapidly in the veins, and sure as an opiate stealing upon the senses.

"I am confident that thou art as ravishingly beautiful—no, as superbly handsome in countenance," replied the infatuated Florimel, "as thou art magnificent in the Diana-like proportions of thy form. Oh! wherefore hast thou cast thine invisible chains around me, irresistible enchantress that thou art? For even now—despite of a profound sense of duty prompting me to start from thine arms and give back my allegiance to the image of the lovely but capricious Pauline,—yes, despite of that better feeling which stirs within me like a remorse, I am unable to shake off the manacles and the fetters which thou hast rivetted upon me! Well—then—be thou Satan in a woman's shape, or an angel divested for the moment of thy glory,—be thou a fiend sent in disguise to tempt me on to the gulf of perdition, or a heavenly being teaching me the paths of elysian enjoyment,—whichever thou art, thou hast triumphed over me—I am thine—unredeemably thine—body and soul—heart and hand—intellect and sense——Oh! yes, I am thine—I am thine!"

And the young nobleman, who was now worked up to a pitch of frenetic enthusiasm which placed him utterly beyond the mastership of his own thoughts, words, or actions, strained the seductive creature to his breast with all the violence of those impassioned feelings;—and when he experienced all the responsive ardour of her own lascivious nature, he was like a man who, in mingled ecstacy and madness, would leap into a volcano's crater, grapple with a tiger, or perform any other equally rabid or desperate deed at the bidding of a woman's tongue.

"Now, Gabriel," said the Unknown Lady, satisfied that her empire over him was complete, and that this sway was as potent over his mind as over his faculties—as enthralling with regard to the sentiment as it was in respect to the sense,—"and now, Gabriel—my own dearly beloved Gabriel," she resumed, in her deepest, sweetest, most melodious, and most touching tones,—"you have abandoned yourself entirely unto me, body and soul; and I fear that you will repent to-morrow of the rashness with which the pledge has been given?"

"No—by heaven! such will not prove the case!" exclaimed Florimel, almost indignant at the suspicion; and then, such was his infatuation, he broke forth into the most passionate entreaties that the Unknown Lady would repose implicit confidence in him.

"Yes—I do believe you, my Gabriel," she said at length, when the powers of language were exhausted by him in glowing protestations and fervid pledges;—"and now I will ask you what you meant by the question which you put to me ere now, and which demanded wherefore we should separate at all?"

"I meant, dearest lady," replied Florimel, "that either as my mistress or as my wife must you henceforth be the companion of my existence!"

"As your mistress—or as your wife," repeated the lady with the slow deliberation of a musing tone. "Ah! it were more fitting that I should be your mistress, because I am some years older than you: but my pride—my vanity—my reputation—in fine, all other motives urge me to become your wife. Tell me, then, Florimel—tell me, whether you will

marry me—whether you will lead me to the altar and bestow thy name upon me?"

"I will—I will—if it will make thee happy and secure thee altogether to me," exclaimed the young nobleman.

"And in return," said the lady, with a rapid utterance, "I will undertake to save you, Gabriel,—yes—save you from the perils which now threaten you! I will save your fortune—I will save your peerage—and this law-suit, which has already been commenced against you, will I crush in the very bud!"

"My God! who are you, dearest and most incomprehensible of women?" exclaimed the young nobleman, renewed amazement breaking in somewhat upon the infatuation and enthusiasm which the mysterious lady had succeeded in exciting in his soul.

"No matter *at present* who I am," she responded, instantaneously redoubling the fond ardour of her caresses and winning him back into the mystic halo and intoxicating influence of her Circean fascinations. "You have declared that you will marry me, Gabriel: but I must give you time to ponder upon this pledge. Nay—I will rather put it in the light of a condition which I stipulate. And that condition is summed up in the words—*Make me your wife, and I will stifle the law-suit which otherwise must inevitably ruin you in respect to fortune and despoil you of your rank!* But as I am not vain nor foolish enough to suppose that you will experience towards me *to-morrow* precisely the same rapturous devotion with which you bless, honour, and rejoice me *to-night*,—and as I am well aware, then, that the fulfilment or the refusal of the condition which I have laid down are alternatives which can only be the result of calm deliberation,—I am about to describe to you the means by which you may communicate with me at any time, should you wish to do so."

"And those means," cried Florimel, eagerly. "What are they?"

"A simple intimation to your own solicitor, Mr. Cresswell, that you have made up your mind to propose an amicable settlement of the matter at issue."

"Then you are acquainted with my solicitor?—you must know him—and he must know you?" exclaimed Florimel, once more seized with the wildest surprise. "Nay,—he must even be in communication with you! Or else how could a simple intimation of such a nature as the one you have suggested, reach *your* ears so readily, unless through *him*?"

"Most solemnly do I assure you, Gabriel," responded the lady, her voice showing that she was smiling as she spoke,—"that I am not only altogether unacquainted with Mr. Cresswell, your attorney—but that I have never seen him in my life—at least to my knowledge."

"Then how can anything which I may say to *him* reach your ears," demanded Florimel, more and more bewildered by the turn which the discourse was thus taking.

"Must not such an intimation as I have supposed you to be inclined to make sooner or later—must it not, I ask, be communicated into other channels?" said the lady.

"Ah! I comprehend," cried Florimel. "Yes—truly: an intimation from me that I am anxious to settle matters amicably, must of necessity travel into the enemy's camp. Oh! is it possible, dear lady, that you are in any way connected with my foes?"

"Far from it—they do not know me," was the prompt answer, delivered in a tone of confidence. "But wherefore should you seek to penetrate into my sources of information, since you *must* comprehend by this time that I am a being involved in mystery and shrouded by a veil which the hand of curiosity cannot possibly draw aside until the day, the hour, and the minute shall come when I choose to give my permission. Now rest assured, Gabriel, that I can aid you in your present difficulty—and do not blind yourself to the fact that it is unsurmountable on your part. Your adversary will inevitably triumph if you trust the question to the issue of a law-process: but *you* shall triumph, Gabriel, if you accede to the condition I have laid down. And should you hesitate—which you will do, I am fully aware,—should you remain undecided for even weeks and months—and then in the long run find yourself compelled to fall back upon the succour which I propose to render available on your behalf—in such a case, I say, fear not to appeal to me through the medium I have suggested—imagine not that it has become too late for me to aid you, or that my sentiments towards you have undergone a change. Do you understand me?"

"Perfectly, my beloved and mysterious friend," exclaimed Lord Florimel. "Oh! fear not that I shall be long ere I adopt the means and follow the instructions which are to bring us together again—no more to separate!"

"We shall see," murmured the lady, with a half-suppressed sigh: but it was evident that she did not experience the same confidence which the young nobleman entertained with regard to the strength of the impassioned ardour and the permanence of the fervid enthusiasm whereby he was now enthralled. "And now," she suddenly exclaimed, after a brief pause and in a tone of reviving cheerfulness,—"and now, beloved Gabriel, for an hour of bliss and elysian joy in each other's arms and on that couch——"

But her further utterance was drowned in the billing murmurs of the kisses which Lord Florimel fastened upon her lips, and which she gave back with all the intoxicating lubricity of her ripe and luscious mouth.

* * * * *
* * * * *

A clock, apparently belonging to some adjacent church or chapel, proclaimed the hour of four in the morning,—when the Unknown Lady started from the arms of Florimel, whom she thus abruptly awakened from a dreamy repose which had stolen voluptuously over him.

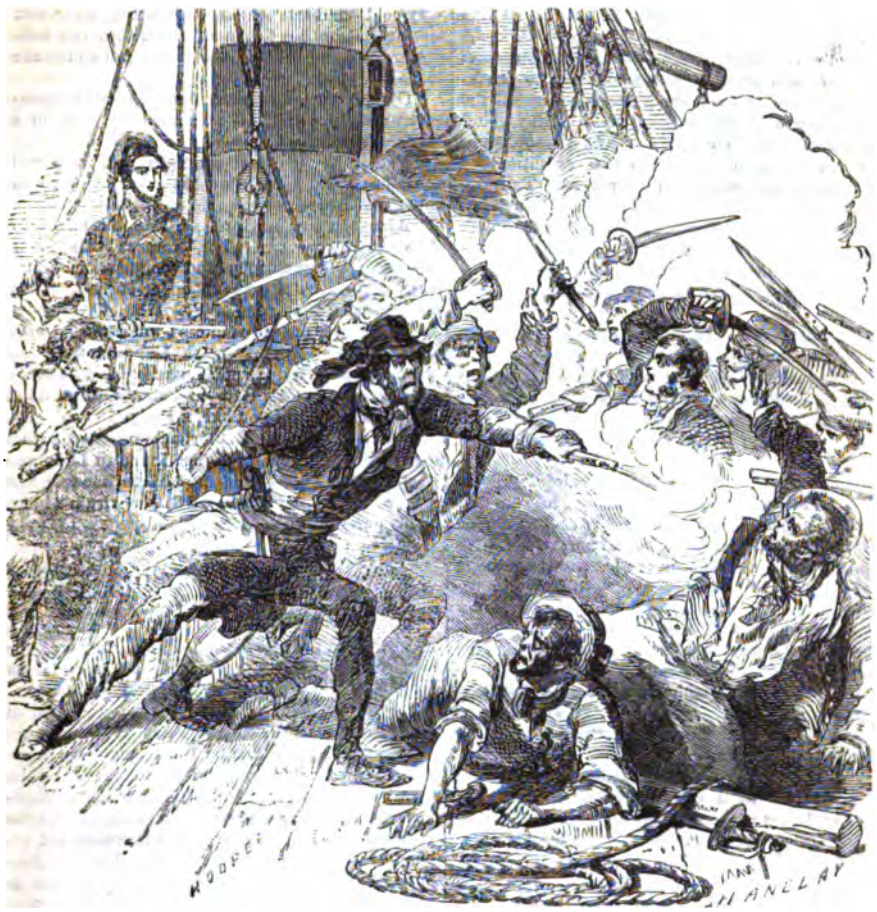
"What! is it time to separate?" he exclaimed.

"Yes: hasten, dear Gabriel—delay not, I beseech thee!" returned the lady.

He immediately complied with her wishes; and in a few minutes they had both resumed their apparel in the utter darkness which continued to pervade that boudoir of love, of mystery, and of a perfumed atmosphere.

"And now, my beloved Gabriel, thou wilt submit to the precaution which is so imperatively necessary?" said the Unknown, throwing into her voice all the winning charm and seductiveness of her melodious intonations.

"Yes—cheerfully do I submit to anything which inspires thee with confidence in me," returned the young nobleman, upon whose senses and faculties the



influence of a profound infatuation and an engrossing rapture was still maintaining its empire.

The lady murmured some endearing words, while she carefully fastened a silk handkerchief over Florimel's eyes: then, giving him his hat, she led him from the room. The door she left open behind her; and thus Rao experienced no difficulty in following close behind—for the passage and the staircase were still involved in a darkness deep as that which fell upon Egypt.

The door at the foot of the staircase was thrown open by the lady, who hurried Florimel along without pausing to close it;—and the sable page therefore found every facility offered for his escape. But it was now of the utmost importance to him to reach Piccadilly *before* his master—so that, in case Florimel should inquire for him when arriving at home, he might not be missed. Accordingly, while the Unknown Lady was conducting her noble paramour along the gravel-walk, Rao plunged rapidly but noiselessly amidst the evergreens the position of which was dimly shadowed forth in the misty obscurity that had succeeded the light of moon and stars. In a few moments he gained the garden-wall, which he climbed with the agility of a cat;—and thus, favoured by the deep gloom, he fled unobserved from the vicinage of the place where he had listened to a discourse which had amazed him profoundly and to sighs of pleasure which had excited him strangely

But he did not quit the neighbourhood of that mansion without having paused for a minute to study its salient features as well as the darkness of the morning-hour would permit: and he was enabled to observe *enough* to impress his mind with the positive conviction that he should not fail to recognise the place again.

At a short distance he was lucky enough to overtake a hackney coach, which bore him back to Piccadilly in a little more than a quarter of an

hour;—and he arrived at home a few minutes before the vehicle containing Lord Florimel stopped at the door.

But, to return to that nobleman, we should observe that so soon as the lady had conducted him to the garden gate, she made him pause while she hurriedly repeated to him that condition upon which she was prepared to succour him in crushing his enemies;—and she likewise reiterated the means he was to adopt in order to convey to her his desire to see her again, should he sooner or later resolve upon agreeing to that condition and throwing himself entirely into her arms. Thus upwards of five minutes elapsed while the Unknown Lady was breathing her farewell words in Florimel's ears; and thus also was an opportunity unconsciously afforded to the black page to achieve his successful escape from the mansion and its neighbourhood.

The mysterious syren now pressed Florimel's hands with impassioned fervour to her lips: then, opening the gate, she murmuringly bade him farewell. At the same instant he was raised in the strong arms of the tall footman and thrust into the carriage: the door was banged—and the vehicle started off at a gallop.

Florimel removed the handkerchief from his eyes; and when he tried the windows, he found, as he had expected, that the wooden blinds were drawn up and that they were immoveable. He then threw himself back in the luxurious barouche and gave way to his meditations,—the joyous recollections of the past few hours' pleasure now rapidly mingling with feelings of bitter compunction and poignant remorse as the image of Pauline rose before his mental vision.

At length the barouche stopped—the door was opened—he leapt out—and the equipage was whirled away again with all the rapidity which two superb steeds were capable of exerting.

Florimel paused for a few moments to follow it with his eyes as it rushed glancingly along the rows of lamps which marked, as with a tracery of light, the descending and then ascending thoroughfare stretching away along the margin of one park and towards the entrance of another;—and as the young nobleman stood gazing until the din of its wheels and its horses' hoofs were lost in the distance, he heaved a profound sigh as he thought of the temptations—the irresistible temptations—into which that departing carriage had this night borne him!

The door of his mansion stood open—and Rao was there to receive him

"What! not in bed, my boy?" exclaimed Florimel, surprised to observe that his page was still up and dressed at that late hour—or rather, early hour in the morning.

"I fancied that your lordship might perhaps need my attendance," said the sable youth, in his wonted quiet manner and without the least embarrassment or confusion in his looks.

"You are a good and grateful boy, Rao," said Lord Florimel, passing his hand with a caressing air of approval over the silken jetty hair of the page.

And Rao's slender form trembled in every fibre—quivered in every nerve, at his master's touch;—and beneath the darkness of his skin, the blood glowed in deepest crimson in the flesh of his cheeks, while it boiled in his veins with the fury of some passion profoundly stirred.

"You tremble, Rao—you shiver," said Florimel, in a tone of commiseration. "You are evidently very cold—and this is all through sitting up to wait for me. Poor boy! Another time let the hall-porter perform his duty—nor should you undertake to do it for him."

"Oh! my lord, it has given me a heartfelt pleasure to sit up to-night!" exclaimed the boy, in a thrilling tone.

"You are a good and grateful youth," repeated Florimel; "and I am more than ever rejoiced to think that I received you into my service."

"And each day, my lord, am I more rejoiced to think that I have entered it," returned Rao: but the strange significancy and ominous meaning which formed as it were an under-current in his tone, escaped the notice of Florimel.

"Well—give me my candle—I will dispense with your services to-night—or as I should say, this morning," observed the nobleman. "And now betake yourself to rest, Rao—and another time don't sit up for me unless you like, my boy."

Thus speaking, Lord Florimel hastened to his own chamber, to dream of the Unknown Lady and Pauline—the joys of the mysterious boudoir and his own deep infidelity towards the virgin-object of his purer and holier adoration.

CHAPTER CLXIII.

THE BUCCANEERS.

A MONTH had elapsed since Philip Ramsey, the resuscitated criminal, embarked at Liverpool on board a small vessel bound for New York

He had quitted England only through dread of the threats which the outraged Earl of Desborough had levelled against him on that tremendous occasion when the incident of the portrait revealed the identity of *Gustavus Wakefield* the sham West-Indian with *Philip Ramsey* the resuscitated of the gallows. On that occasion, as the reader will remember, the almost heart-broken Earl of Desborough had addressed himself in these terms to Ramsey:—"Here are five hundred pounds for your use; and, by the living God! if you venture to remain in England—if you do not proceed in my carriage direct to Liverpool and thence depart without delay for America—I will show you no more mercy, but proclaim the fact of your existence to the world and set the blood-hounds of justice to hunt you to that destruction which you have escaped once."

These words rang in the ears of the wretched criminal throughout the journey from London to Liverpool. They seemed to pursue him like an anathema,—and although he had many and cogent reasons to induce him to remain in England—yes, to remain in the land where he was every instant fearful of being recognised—he nevertheless felt as if a spell were urging him on to the fulfilment of the conditions imposed upon him by the Earl. And thus was it that his terrors ruled him until he stood upon the deck of the *Fire-Fly* schooner at Liverpool;—and it was only when the vessel was putting out to sea that he began to reflect that he perhaps had yielded too much to his alarm in thus suffering the Earl's menaces to drive him into exile!

But it was then too late to amend the step he had taken—too late to retrace his way. He could not quit the vessel, now that she was fairly under weigh like a bird upon the wing;—and he therefore resigned himself to the fate which forced him upon this voyage across the Atlantic — consoling himself, moreover, with the thought which flashed to his mind, *that it would be alike safer and easier to negotiate for his full and complete pardon with those who, he well knew, were able to procure it, and whose influence he could command!*

The vessel in which he had embarked was a schooner: it was small, but a fast-sailer and an excellent sea-boat;—and in the rough weather which was speedily encountered, it fully justified all the praises that the captain was wont to bestow upon his "craft." Fortunately for Ramsey, there was not a soul on board who had ever seen him before the occasion of his embarkation; nor did the remotest shadow of a suspicion exist that he was otherwise than what he professed to be—"Mr. Gustavus Wakefield, a merchant."

A month passed, we say, since the good schooner *Fire-Fly* put out of the Mersey on her voyage to New York. During this interval, as we have likewise observed, she encountered some tempestuous weather: but she weathered it all, though somewhat impeded in her course by the adverse winds with which she had at times to contend. More than two-thirds of the distance were however accomplished by the expiration of the fourth week; and Ramsey had already laid down, in a methodical manner, the various plans which he intended to adopt on his arrival in the States, when an incident occurred which changed his position, his thoughts, and his schemes with a bewildering suddenness.

The extreme beauty of the weather had called Ramsey one morning from his hammock at an earlier hour than usual. He went upon deck as the sun was about to rise in all that splendour which is most irresistibly overpowering alike to the physical view and the mental conception, upon the broad expanse of ocean. Dark clouds of neutral tint covered the heavens, save in the eastern horizon: and there, in the spot whence the orb of day was to beam upon the world, the sky was of a sombre brown.

Reader, you have beheld the gradient flaming up of the red fire upon the stage of a theatre,—how gradually it appears and then rises behind the scenery, until it flames from wing to wing, and from floor to roof, involving the whole place in a blaze of mimic glory. If you have seen this effect of art, gentle reader, when well managed and in a spacious theatre, —then may you form an idea of how the sun, on the morning whereof we are writing, rose behind those sombre brown clouds which lay piled up, mass upon mass and layer upon layer, in the eastern horizon. And first those clouds began to shine dimly, like a far-off conflagration: then, lighting up as if with an internal fire penetrating through them, they exchanged their sombre hues for glorious tints of the richest purple and the most vivid crimson. Soon the edges of the clouds kindled into borders of burnished gold, brightening into fringes of living fire: until the luminous effulgence spread farther and wider over the horizon, and thence rolled itself on and on in a sheet of dissolving light, which gilded at last the entire canopy of heaven!

And now this flood of living gold revealed a vessel in the distance—far a-head of the *Fire-Fly*. Ramsey stood watching her as she seemed to be sailing through the blaze of luminous glory which thus bathed her. Presently the captain of the *Fire-Fly* who had been examining her with his glass for some time, exclaimed in a tone of surprise, that she was "putting about." The mate of the schooner took the telescope in his turn and scrutinised the ship a-head, which was pronounced to be a large brig; and he likewise expressed amazement at the course which she was adopting. Ramsey now ventured to inquire the cause of the astonishment thus inspired by the movements of the stranger-vessel; and he was informed that she must either be distressed for provisions, or else a pirate.

This latter alternative startled the resuscitated criminal; and the captain, observing the mingled alarm and surprise which Ramsey's countenance very naturally denoted, hastened to explain himself more fully.

"You see, Mr. Wakefield," he said, "it isn't right that that vessel should put about unless it wanted to speak with us. Now there can't well be more than two reasons why it should. The fust is, that it's in distress for provisions;—and the second is —that it's a pirate on the look out for any craft smaller than itself."

"And which do you think is the more probable?" asked Ramsey, his tone and manner both indicating a feeling of uneasiness.

The captain rolled his quid over from one side of his mouth to the other—gave a long and solemn stare at Ramsey—hitched up his breeches—and said at length, "Well, sir, since you ax me for the candid truth, I'm blowed if I don't think she 's a pirate—'cos she don't put up no colours, and 'cos she looks too taut and neat about her rigging to have anything like famine a-ailin' the crew."

Having thus spoken, the captain proceeded to consult the mate; and the half-dozen sailors forming the rest of the crew of the *Fire-Fly* speedily gathered near the spot where their officers were conversing. The opinion that the stranger-vessel was "no good," became general; and the schooner hoisted all canvass in order to run away from her. But the brig was enabled to bear rapidly down upon her; and when escape was seen to be impossible, the captain of the *Fire-Fly* summoned his crew around him—distributed cutlasses and pistols—and made the following harangue:—

"My friends, you can see as well as I can that there's somethink more than suspicious about that there brig which is dropping down upon us. It may be that she's commanded by some lubber as doesn't know when to haul up his colours so as to show a friendly aspeck; but I'm werry much afeard she'll turn out a wixen. In this case, my friends, we've on'y one dooty to perform—which is to defend the good ship *Fire-Fly* till the werry last. And now, my men, mark me when I say that if this suspicious-looking craft *does* prove a rum customer, I for one will sooner go to Davy Jones's locker than haul down our colours or give up our owners' property to a parcel of buccaneering waggabones."

This speech was loudly applauded by the few brave fellows to whom it was addressed: but Ramsey stood at a distance—moody, silent, and with a sad foreboding in his mind, as he kept his eyes

fixed upon the vessel which was so rapidly and so suspiciously bearing down upon the *Fire-Fly*.

"Don't you mean to lend us a helping hand, Mr. Wakefield?" demanded the captain, as he advanced and proffered a cutlass to Ramsey.

"Most certainly," was the prompt reply given by the resuscitated criminal, as he started from his reverie and seized the weapon which the hardy mariner handed him.

In a few minutes the brig came sufficiently near for the persons on the deck of the *Fire-Fly* to observe certain appearances which were only too well calculated to set at rest any doubts that might have previously existed in respect to the character of that stranger-vessel and the intentions of its crew. For the men on the deck of the brig were all armed to the teeth; and in the bow a ferocious-looking fellow was planted with a grapnel ready to be flung into the rigging of the schooner.

"You perceive, my mates," said the captain of this latter vessel, "that our worst fears are confirmed and that we shall have a fight for it."

"Aye, aye, sir," exclaimed the men thus addressed: "but we ain't a going to give up the *Fire-Fly* without a blow in her defence."

Scarcely had the gallant crew of the trim little schooner given this response, when a man on board the brig was seen to flourish a speaking-trumpet as an indication that he was about to address the captain of the schooner.

"Now, then?" vociferated the latter, interrogatively.

"Haul down your colours—fling your weapons overboard—shorten sail—and send a couple of men on board of us as hostages of good faith on your part," exclaimed the individual with the speaking-trumpet on the deck of the stranger-vessel.

"Who are you?" demanded the captain of the *Fire-Fly*.

"Ask no questions—but do as you're bid," was the imperious response.

"Then we'll resist you as a set of freebooting scoundrels," cried the captain of the schooner: then, turning hastily towards his men, he said, "Treat them to a volley, my fine fellers."

And every pistol was simultaneously fired from the deck of the *Fire-Fly*.

The volley was instantaneously returned by the pirates, who at the same time by a skilful manœuvre ran their brig across the schooner's bows—and the grapnel fastened the two vessels together in a moment.

Then from the deck of the brig did half-a-dozen ruffian-looking fellows, all armed to the teeth, leap on board the schooner; and a terrible conflict ensued between the buccaneers and the gallant defenders of the *Fire-Fly*. But what words can be found to express the astonishment of Philip Ramsey, when he recognised the redoubtable Magsman and the ferocious Beggarman in the leaders of the boarding-party?

Dropping his cutlass in a moment—staggering back towards the mast—with a countenance as pale as death and limbs that trembled convulsively, the resuscitated criminal kept his eyes fixed with a wild vacancy upon the features of the two desperate men who were combatting with irresistible valour at the head of their pirate-followers. Too much occupied to take notice either of Ramsey or of the mingled amazement and terror with which he was regarding them, the Magsman and the Big Beggarman fought as if the fate of the whole world depended upon the issue. Their lion-like courage was worthy of a better cause;—and vainly did the crew of the *Fire-Fly* contend against a boarding-party whose leaders seemed to be endowed with the strength of giants and the fury of demons.

The captain of the schooner was the first who succumbed—self-devoted to that duty which he owed his employers, who, comfortably seated in their counting-house in Liverpool, little thought at the moment how tremendous was the danger which had overtaken their vessel. And now upon the deck thereof flowed rivulets of blood—ghastly wounds were given and received—through the ambient air clanged the din of cutlasses and echoed the sharp crack of pistols—and for upwards of a quarter of an hour the combat raged with a frightful fury. But at the expiration of that time the result was no longer doubtful. The captain of the *Fire-Fly* and two of his best men were slain; and the other four were speedily overpowered. Two perished fighting until the very last: the other two were made prisoners and carried on board the brig, where one died soon afterwards from the wounds he had received. Thus was there but a single survivor of the crew of the *Fire-Fly*—save and except the resuscitated criminal, Philip Ramsey.

It was not until the conflict was over and the schooner was completely in the hands of the buccaneers, that the Magsman and the Big Beggarman observed a tall, slender, genteel-looking man, seated in the stern of the vessel, with his elbows resting upon his knees and his countenance buried in his hands. Naturally presuming that he must be some passenger, who had taken no part in the recent fray, they forthwith accosted him with some words of re-assurance: but when he raised his head and revealed a face which, though ghastly pale, was not to be mistaken in any lineament and could not fail to be recognised in every feature, the two ruffians who had a moment before fought with such desperate valour, shrank back in affright and gave vent to ejaculations of horror.

But neither their words nor their manner were observed at the moment by any of their comrades: for Watkins, Bradley, and the other freebooters were all busily employed in overhauling the stores and cargo of the *Fire-Fly*;—and the eager glance of scrutiny with which Ramsey's eyes swept the deck of the schooner and thence travelled as rapidly and as searchingly to the brig which lay alongside, showed him that the terror with which he had inspired the Magsman and the Beggarman was unnoticed elsewhere.

"My good friends," he accordingly said, in a hoarse, thick voice,—"do not expose me—do not abandon me! I am indeed your old acquaintance——"

"Holy God! what does this mean?" exclaimed the Beggarman, clinging to his companion's arm for support and gazing in mingled horror and consternation upon the pale face of the resuscitated criminal.

"Don't be a fool, Stephen," said the Magsman. "It's a being of real flesh and blood—that's clear But who are you, sir?" he demanded, fixing his looks with some degree of apprehension, despite the boldness of his words, upon Ramsey's features.

"I am he for whom you take me," answered the wretched being. "A combination of marvellous cir-

cumstances, too long to be related now, have snatched me from death—restored me, indeed, to life—made me a passenger on board this vessel——"

"And you are Philip Ramsey?" interrupted the Magsman, lowering his voice to a whisper as he put the question.

"I am—I am," responded the resuscitated, in a tone of mingled despair and earnest appeal. "But do not expose me to your comrades, I conjure you! Whatever your present avocations may be—whatever your friends may be—I beg and implore that my secret may remain inviolable: for sooner than be taunted with the damnable ordeal through which I have passed, I would rather put an end at once to my wretched existence!"

And the resuscitated criminal pointed over the ship's side to the calm water whereon it floated—as much as to intimate that the means of self-destruction lay within reach of suicidal steps.

"Don't be afraid, my friend—we shan't blab," said the Magsman. "But is it possible, after all, that ——you know what I mean——"

"Yes—is it possible?" echoed the Big Beggarman: and, as he spoke, he ventured to lay his hand upon Ramsey's arm to assure himself it was in truth a being of flesh and blood, and not a ghost, that thus wore the shape and semblance of the Aylesbury banker who had been executed in front of Newgate!

"My God! don't torture me with questions now," exclaimed Ramsey. "I am trembling from head to foot lest any of your comrades should overhear your words or notice your gestures of astonishment. Will you control yourselves?—will you cast off that air of mingled mistrust and wonder?"

"To be sure we will," said the Magsman, seizing Ramsey's hand and giving it a hearty shake;—"to be sure we will—now that we're satisfied of your being what you represent yourself. But, by God! anything more extraordinary than this——"

"I can't believe it yet," observed the Big Beggarman, still surveying Ramsey with the most unfeigned astonishment. "And yet, of course it is as you say——"

"Besides, there's every feature the same," added the Magsman.

"At all events you might as well give us a sign that you're really Philip Ramsey and not some brother of his'n," exclaimed the Big Beggarman, grinning at the lucid idea which he had just propounded as the most satisfactory means for the resuscitated to adopt in order to prove his own identity.

"My God! you will drive me mad," he cried, stamping his foot and clenching his hands with the fury of impatience. "At one moment you believe me—at another you are incredulous. But I am wrong—oh! I am wrong to be thus irritable," he exclaimed, his voice suddenly altering to a tone of contrition: "for I know that it is difficult for you to put faith in this marvel which has suddenly presented itself to your view. Let me then remind you of all our old transactions—the issue of the spurious coin—the imprisonment of Sir Richard Stamford in Thacker's Court—and the attempt which you made upon my life on the river, near Execution Dock," added Ramsey, fixing his eyes upon the countenance of the Big Beggarman.

"Enough! enough!" exclaimed the latter: "I am convinced now. But you must tell us all about it, sir——"

"Yes, yes—when we have leisure and are alone together," interrupted Ramsey. "And now let me beseech you once more to retain my secret——"

"It wouldn't do us no good to reveal it," observed the Big Beggarman. "Besides, we're too glad to fall in with an old employer, and under such peculiar circumstances, to think of doing you a mischief."

"Besides, we can all row in the same boat under the death's-head and cross-bones," said the Magsman, in allusion to the flag adopted by pirates. "And now, sir, by what name are we to know you in future?"

"Gustavus Wakefield," was the response.

"Then come on board the *Royal George* brig, Mr. Wakefield," said the Magsman; "and there we'll make you as comfortable as possible."

The resuscitated criminal accordingly prepared to follow Joe Warren from the schooner's deck: but, suddenly bethinking himself of certain objects which he had left in his cabin, he hurried down to take possession of them. Those objects, which consisted of money and important documents, he speedily secured about his person; and with his portmanteau thrown over his shoulder, he proceeded on board the *Royal George*. To this same pirate-ship was the cargo of the *Fire-Fly* speedily transferred by the buccaneers; and, as soon as this task was accomplished, a large hole was bored in the bottom of the gallant schooner, which was left to sink as speedily as it might.

Away bore the *Royal George*,—away on its voyage towards the American coast; and in the course of that day did the Magsman and the Beggarman find time to pass an hour alone with Ramsey. Then from the mouth of this unhappy being did they hear the wondrous tale of his resuscitation; and they were about to explain, in their turn, the incidents which had hurried them on into the avocation of freebooters, when Watkins, the individual who acted as captain of the *Royal George*, rushed into the cabin to inform them that a British man-of-war had just been descried in the distance.

It was verging towards sunset when this announcement was made; and in a few minutes the report of a cannon booming over the bosom of the Atlantic, conveyed the unmistakable command for the *Royal George* to hoist her colours. Accordingly up went the British flag to the mast-head of the brig: but a second cannon from the man-of-war bore across the waters the signal for the brig to heave to and wait until the ship should come up with her. This was an intimation which the pirates were by no means disposed to obey, inasmuch as it showed that the frigate—for such was the British man-of-war now in sight—entertained some suspicion or misgiving with respect to the *Royal George*. A speedy council of war was therefore held; and it was resolved that the pirate-brig should disobey the signal of the king's ship, and trust to the coming darkness to escape the pursuit which was certain to be instituted.

The *Royal George* accordingly crowded all her canvass upon mast and spar; and away—away she sped with surprising velocity, over the waters the hues of which were deepening in proportion as the sun sank lower into the west. A third cannon was fired on board the frigate: but the brig heeded it not,—and the last beams of the orb of day, ere it sank into the bosom of the occidental waves

flickered upon the white canvass of the *Royal George* as it dashed madly over the rising billows, and on the still ampler sails of the superb frigate as she pressed onward in the exciting chase.

The wind was increasing in strength; and the sunset was succeeded by a night of inky darkness. For hours and hours did the *Royal George* thus hold on through the pitchy gloom which was almost deep and dense enough to be felt; and the crew fondly hoped that their gallant ship would escape the frigate altogether.

Anxious, therefore, were the looks which sought to penetrate through the first glimmering of the dawn: piercing were the glances that the pirates threw in all directions from the mast-head and the deck of the *Royal George*, the moment that the faintest gleam appeared in the eastern horizon. For a few minutes there was a solemn stillness throughout the vessel—an awful uncertainty, composed of a dread apprehension and a faint hope: for, lo! in the distance there *was* an object which had already begun to assume the shape and semblance of a square-rigged ship. And by degrees, as that glimmering in the east advanced, like the rays of a lamp from the far-off depths of a huge cavern or profound sepulchre, the hope grew fainter and fainter still, and the apprehension stronger and stronger—until the former expired altogether, and the latter was realized by the presence of the British frigate within gun-shot distance of the *Royal George*.

And now there was a flash seen at one point of the long dark hull of the man-of-war; and in another moment the report of a cannon came booming over the deep blue sea on whose bosom the mists of obscurity were gradually yielding to twilight. All was consternation now on board the brig; and Watkins commanded the men to obey the signal-gun by bearing to. But the Magsman and Big Beggarman would not hear of anything short of a desperate resistance; and thus a serious quarrel was well nigh taking place on board the *Royal George*, when a second cannon from the frigate brought the buccaneers to their senses—for *this time* a shot came whizzing through the air. The ball struck the bowsprit which it shivered to pieces; and the command of Watkins now experienced no opposition on the part of the Magsman and the Big Beggarman.

The *Royal George* therefore lay to; and in about a quarter of an hour the English frigate came within hailing distance. This latter was a splendid vessel—carrying thirty-six guns—having tall tapering masts—and with an image of the Goddess Diana at the figure-head. A boat was speedily lowered; and in a few moments it ran alongside the pirate-brig.

"What is the name of your ship?" asked the lieutenant who was in command of the boat.

"The *Royal George*, sir," was the reply delivered by Watkins as he leant over the bulwarks: for as all the ship's papers were made out in that name, the buccaneers had not as yet dared to change it.

"Whence do you come?—and whither are you bound?" demanded the lieutenant from his seat in the boat.

"Liverpool—New York," laconically answered Watkins. "Will you board us, sir?—or am I to go to the frigate with the papers?"

"You will adopt the latter course, if you please," said the lieutenant.

"In one moment, sir," replied Watkins: and, turning away from the bulwark, he hurried down the companion-ladder into his own cabin to fetch the ship's papers.

"I say, old fellow, what the devil can this mean?" asked the Magsman, who, together with the Big Beggarman and Bradley, had followed Watkins to the cabin.

"The King's ship evidently suspects us," replied this individual. "It has no doubt heard of our adventure with the brig which we attacked and which was glad to pay us a thousand dollars as a compromise rather than fight it out. I told you it was foolish to begin buccaneering before you had touched at New York and got your business settled there, whatever it may be: because then you might have got fresh papers—given the ship a new name——"

"Well, well," interrupted the Magsman, impatiently; "it's no use talking of what you advised, or of what ought to have been done. It's true that we got a thousand dollars from the American brig t'other day—and that we took the whole cargo of the English schooner yesterday. But the latter has gone to the bottom; and the British man-of-war has got nothing to do with the other affair."

"Only that if they really can prove us to be pirates, we shall all be hanged at the yard-arm," said Watkins, solemnly.

"And what the devil are you going to do, then?" demanded the Big Beggarman, who did not much admire the prospect thus disagreeably held out for his contemplation.

"I am going on board the frigate to tell as good a story and put as bold a face upon the matter as I can," said Watkins; "and if I succeed in making the captain of his Majesty's ship *Diana* believe that it's all right with us, I suppose you'll give me credit for some little good management?"

"But do you really think you *can* set at rest any suspicions that may be entertained?" demanded the Magsman, an unwonted feeling of uneasiness creeping over him.

"I must do my best," said Watkins, as he secured the ship's papers about his person. "Now, then—who will act as supercargo? Come, Bradley—you shall go with me in that capacity."

"Aye, aye, sir," responded the individual thus addressed.

Watkins and Bradley accordingly quitted the cabin together, and embarked in the man-of-war's boat, which instantaneously put off with them.

"I don't like the look of all this at all," said the Magsman to his companion in iniquity, when they were left alone together in the cabin of the *Royal George*.

"Watkins and Bradley going off along with each other in this manner—eh?" said the Beggarman. "Well, I don't like it either."

"Those two fellows have always stuck together like bricks from the very beginning," observed the Magsman.

"And I've often seen 'em in earnest conversation together," added the Big Beggarman. "But after all there may be nothing wrong betwixt them?"

"Well, I hope not. But wasn't Watkins in a devil of a hurry just now to lay to, even before the shot carried away our bowsprit?" said the Magsman

"And then," he continued, the cloud deepening on his countenance as his suspicions grew stronger,—"didn't he seem to be precious ready to go on board the frigate, in spite of the danger of being run up at the yard's-arm?"

"I don't know what to think," said the Big Beggarman, in a state of most bewildering perplexity and painful uneasiness. "I can scarcely make my mind up to proclaim Watkins and Bradley both traitors and scoundrels: for didn't they negotiate that transaction between us and the American brig——"

"By heaven, they did!" cried the Magsman, slapping his hand violently upon his thigh as he leant against the cabin table: "and now a thought flashes to my mind!"

"What is it?" demanded the Big Beggarman, eagerly.

"I tell you what, Stephen—it was through that very affair we're now betrayed!" exclaimed Joe Warren. "By golea! I see it all—I see it all——and we *are* betrayed, as sure as I'm alive!"

"How do you know?—what do you mean?" inquired Stephen Price, *alias* the Big Beggarman.

"I mean that when Watkins and Bradley went on board the American brig to settle the compromise which the captain of that vessel proposed to make by paying the thousand dollars——"

"Yes, yes," interrupted the Beggarman, impatiently. "Well—what did Watkins and Bradley do on that occasion, think you?"

"They no doubt told the American captain to give information concerning us to the first cruiser he should meet," replied Joe Warren, his countenance expressing a diabolical hatred and a ferocious longing for vengeance against those whom he imagined to be engaged in betraying him.

"By jingo, that is not unlikely!" exclaimed the Big Beggarman. "Watkins alluded just now to that affair of the American brig—and even reproached us with it——"

"To be sure! A man always throws into your teeth the very thing which is to be made the instrument of your own betrayal and ruin," cried the Magsman bitterly.

"Betrayal—ruin!" echoed Philip Ramsey, who at that moment descended from the deck into the cabin, and whose ear caught those ominous words as he was gliding down the companion-ladder. "What mean you, my friends?" he demanded, with terrified looks thrown upon the two ruffians alternately.

"We mean what we say," replied the Magsman, ferociously: "that we are betrayed—and that we intend to sell our lives as dearly as possible."

"Betrayed!" echoed Ramsey once more. "By whom? Your captain and his mate have gone on board the frigate——"

"And they won't come back again, I'll be bound," added the Big Beggarman, gloomily. "Now, then, every man to himself in case of need;"—and he began to arm his own person to the very teeth.

"That's a good example, Steeve," said Joe Warren, fastening a cutlass to his own waist and sticking the belt round with pistols. "Now, Mr. Ram—— Wakefield, I mean——"

But at this moment the din of a cannon broke upon their ears, and shook the *Royal George* as much as if it had been fired upon its own deck instead of from the frigate.

The Magsman and the Big Beggarman hurried up the companion-ladder; and the first glance they threw in the direction of the *Diana* showed them that she had moored much nearer to the brig and was evidently prepared to carry matters to the extreme, if resisted.

"My brave fellows," cried the Magsman, addressing the sailors of the *Royal George*, who were all collected in one group and gazing with evident uneasiness on the man-of-war,—"you need not remain in any suspense whatsoever. Prepare yourselves for the worst: we are betrayed! If we are taken we shall be run up to the yard-arm——"

"And so we mean to fight to the very last," added the Big Beggarman, flourishing his cutlass.

"Bravo," shouted the half-dozen sailors belonging to the *Royal George*, and who were disposed to follow the desperate fortunes of Joe Warren and Stephen Price rather than surrender with the certainty of being hanged.

A voice now hailed the brig from the deck of the frigate.

"Let us learn what the King's ship has to say to us," exclaimed some of the sailors of the *Royal George*. "Hark! it's the captain of the *Diana* that's going to speak!"

And such was the fact. The commanding officer of the man-of-war guaranteed their lives to *the sailors* if they would surrender at discretion: but from this proffered amnesty *the two ringleaders* (the Magsman and Big Beggarman being thereby meant) were excluded.

Scarcely was this proposal made, when the half dozen sailors of the *Royal George* precipitated themselves upon Joe Warren and Stephen Price with such unexpected suddenness that these two redoubtable individuals were overpowered in an instant. To disarm and bind them was the work of another moment; and as soon as it was perceived on board the frigate that the commanding officer's proffered amnesty with respect to the sailors' lives, had produced such immediate and important results, a galley was again put off to the *Royal George* to receive the prisoners and the rest of the crew. Into this boat were both the Magsman and the Big Beggarman accordingly forced to descend. The six sailors having thrown down their arms, likewise took their seats in the galley. Ramsey was compelled to follow—and the wounded sailor who had survived the slaughter on board the *Fire-Fly* schooner, was lowered in his hammock into the boat. A second galley now arrived from the *Diana* with an officer and some few sailors who were to take charge of the *Royal George*; and thus terminated the merchant vessel's brief career of piracy.

Sullen and silent, overwhelmed with the crushing sense of their sudden disaster, and cursing in the depths of their souls the treachery of Watkins and Bradley as well as the cowardly perfidiousness of the sailors,—Joe Warren and Stephen Price stood in a few minutes upon the deck of the *Diana* frigate.

But scarcely had they thus set foot on board the man-of-war, when an ejaculation of surprise struck upon their ears: and casting their looks in the direction whence the expression of wonder had emanated, they recognised the well known countenance of Tim Meagles!

CHAPTER CLXIV.

A LADY OF QUALITY IN DIFFICULTIES.

TURN we now to a moderate-sized but handsomely furnished house in Piccadilly—at no great distance from the larger and still more splendid mansion of Lord Florimel.

It was about eleven o'clock in the morning, and in the elegant breakfast-parlour of the moderate-sized dwelling just alluded to, a lady was half-sitting and half-reclining upon a sofa. A cheerful fire burnt in the grate: the curtains of scarlet satin gave with prismatic effect, a fainter tint of their own hue to the mellowed and subdued light which penetrated through the casements;—and the rich crimson of the paper on the walls and the velvet fittings of the furniture, all combined to render the complexion of the fair occupant of that apartment the more delicately lovely.

In the roseate atmosphere of the room, and reclining upon the deep crimson cushions of the sofa, this beauteous woman was set off to the utmost advantage by the morning-wrapper of white muslin which was gathered negligently around her. Her hair, of indescribable paleness, but glossy and shining, was floating partially over the back of the sofa, and partially upon her own alabaster shoulders, which her *deshabille* left revealed. That hair, which the lady was wont to wear in myriads of curls, when her toilette was completed for the day, was now flowing in all the beauteous abandonment of massive tresses; and it shone against the crimson velvet of the sofa like lace of flaxen material on which the sun is shining.

Her countenance was pale—very pale—and even slightly care-worn in appearance: but its extreme loveliness and purity would have disarmed the most critical observer of his objection to its colourless aspect. The hue of health had fled from her cheek; but the camellia-like damask still remained:—and moreover, it was evident that happiness and the mind's tranquillity would soon bring back the tint of the rose to mingle with the stainlessness of the lily. Besides, the red richness and the luscious fulness remained to the lips—the liquid blue and languishing expression to the eyes—and the classic stamp of elegance to the whole countenance!

Then her form—her admirable form—as it was stretched half-reclining upon that sofa, with as much abandonment of the person as was likely to be indulged in when the superb creature was in the solitude of her own parlour and in the negligence of her morning apparel—that fine form, we say, was now to be scanned at its fullest advantage. No corset gave an artificial shape or setting to any contour: the bust retained its rounded voluptuousness through its own natural plumpness;—the luxuriance of the lady's bosom marred not the perfect symmetry and rich shapeliness of either of those globes of snow.

Though her form had expanded into the maturity of its charms, yet was her entire figure characterised by an elasticity which imparted dignity to her carriage when walking, grace and ease to her attitude when sitting, and an air of ineffable abandonment and soft sensuousness to her whole person when reclining negligently as we find her now.

The muslin wrapper being slightly drawn up, displayed just so much of one of the lady's legs as to indicate by its beautiful moulding at the extremity and the robustness into which the delicacy of the ankle gradually swelled, that her limbs were modelled with a grace, a symmetry, and a richness corresponding with the extreme fulness of the bust and the taper elegance of the waist.

This lady, as the reader has doubtless already conjectured, was Mrs. Fitzherbert—the cast-off wife of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales.

She was reclining in a pensive mood upon that sofa—utterly unmindful of the personal charms which her unstudied attitude displayed. Nor indeed was there any necessity for a coquettish affectation on this occasion: for she was alone in that apartment—alone with her own sorrowing thoughts!

The cup of chocolate remained untouched upon the table—the newspaper lay unread upon the sofa. A dozen letters, from some frivolous lady-friends, or else containing invitations to balls and parties which she had no heart to grace with her presence, were tossed negligently aside—the very manner in which they lay, fully testifying the impatience with which they had been opened and the disgust or disappointment with which they had been flung aside the instant the few first lines of their contents were scanned.

The fact was that Mrs. Fitzherbert found herself in the most cruel embarrassment. Too proud to apply to the Prince of Wales for pecuniary assistance, she was utterly without resources at the present moment. Not an article of furniture in the house which she had taken was paid for; and the upholsterer was already clamorous for his money. He had heard from the neighbouring tradesmen that everything which went into Mrs. Fitzherbert's dwelling was delivered upon trust—that not a shilling had as yet been paid to any of her creditors—that the smallest accounts, which are usually cash-transactions, were never liquidated—and that her doors were constantly beset by duns. He had therefore become alarmed for the sum which Mrs. Fitzherbert owed him; and as the amount was two thousand pounds, he felt by no means inclined to lose it for want of putting the machinery of the law into motion. He had accordingly instructed his attorney to menace the lady with instantaneous process;—and as that professional gentleman happened to be Mr. Rigden, we need scarcely inform our readers that Mrs. Fitzherbert had little mercy to expect at his hands.

She had accordingly written to two friends, explaining her unpleasant position and demanding a loan. The Duchess of Devonshire and the Countess of Desborough were the ladies to whom Mrs. Fitzherbert had thus unbosomed herself: and she had confidently expected supplies *by hand* on the previous evening, or at least *by post* on the same morning of which we are writing. But no answers of any kind had reached her: and she therefore felt assured that her two friends must be out of town.

What could she do?—to whom besides should she address herself? She had many wealthy acquaintances, it was true: but there were none, besides the splendid Georgiana of Devonshire and the amiable Eleanor of Desborough, whom she chose to admit into the privacy of her confidence. As for humbling herself so far as to write to the Prince—never! Her pride revolted against such a proceeding: for she could not forget the dastardly, detestably ruffian-like means which he had adopted to break off his connexion with her. Had he thrown

himself upon her mercy—implored her to release him from a compact which menaced his prospects as heir to the British throne—and thus trusted entirely to her love, her generosity, and her friendship,—oh! she felt that their relative positions would have been very different indeed: but no—the *first gentleman in Europe* had, with characteristic heartlessness, employed the most villanous, cowardly, and despicable means in order to coerce her into a separation. Yes—she felt all this: and she vowed that she would sooner go to a debtor's gaol and rot there, than make the slightest appeal to the purse of the man who, though really her husband in the sight of Heaven, had nevertheless proved her bitterest enemy and her most cold-blooded persecutor.

Such was the position and such were the feelings of Mrs. Fitzherbert on this particular morning when we again introduce her to our readers' notice. Small wonder, then, was it that she was pensive and careworn—and that the colour had completely fled from her cheeks.

She was in the midst of a painful reverie, when the door was opened softly—and an ill-looking countenance protruded itself. The door was then pushed more widely open; and the entire person of the individual to whom the disagreeable physiognomy belonged passed into the room. He was followed by another man as repulsive in appearance as himself; and the two individuals, stopping short, exchanged looks, or rather made grimaces at each other, as much as to imply what a capital piece of fun it was! They then took a survey of the apartment;—and having once more expressed their delight by vulgar grins at the stealthy manner in which they had introduced themselves, they advanced towards the sofa.

The sound of their footsteps now fell for the first time upon Mrs. Fitzherbert's ears: and, gazing round with a sudden start, she was both amazed

and terrified at beholding the unceremonious visitors. But almost instantaneously recovering the dignity which was natural to her, she rose from the sofa—drew the morning-wrapper hastily over her bosom—and said in a haughty tone, "Who are you?"

"The lady says who are we, Jack," observed one of the men, looking in a leisurely way at his companion. "I should think she ought to suspect *you* at any rate, by that hang-dog wisage of your'n."

"It 'ud be a heavy bribe, master, that 'ud make me call *you* 'ansom, at all ewents," was the reply, delivered in a half-sulky, half-subdued tone of menial dependence.

"Again I ask who are you?" said Mrs. Fitzherbert; though her fears had already suggested the reply to the question.

"Well, ma'am," observed the individual who had first spoken, and who was dressed with a shabby kind of flashiness, "I won't keep you in no manner of uncertainty on this ere pint. My name's Nathan Crimp, and my office is in Chancery Lane. That's my man; and his name's Jack. What his t'other name be, I don't know—and don't think he does his-self."

"I presume, then, that you are an officer?" said Mrs. Fitzherbert, her heart appearing to rise into her throat and suffocate her as she thus ventured to give utterance to the cruel suspicion that involved a crowning misfortune.

"Lord bless you, ma'am," exclaimed Mr. Crimp, "I thought you knowed all along who we was, and only asked just by way of a matter of form like. I'm sure if I'd suspected for a moment that you was in the dark as to our identity, I should have put you up to that dodge the wery first moment. But when your flunky down in the hall there said that he'd come up and announce us, I told him not to trouble his-self, but just show us which room you was in, and we'd announce ourselves. And so me and my man Jack there, we stole in as quiet as mice, so as not to disturb you, ma'am—which was wery considerate on our part, seeing that Rigden won't pay us a bit the more for doing the thing genteelly."

"Then am I to understand that Mr. Ridgen has had recourse to extreme measures?" said Mrs. Fitzherbert, with difficulty restraining a violent outburst of hysterical grief.

"Rigden always does, ma'am," replied Mr. Crimp, who was the most garrulous sheriff's-officer ever known. "He's a sharp 'un, ma'am—a preshus sharp 'un—isn't he, Jack?"

"Wery, master," growled the individual thus appealed to. "Rigden ain't a man to stand still while there's anythink to be got by going on a-head."

"By goles, you're right there, my boy," ejaculated Mr. Nathan Crimp. "And now, ma'am," he said, adopting a mincing tone of excruciating politeness, as he put his hat under his arm and produced a piece of paper of very ominous form and aspect,—"perhaps you'll be so kind as to pay me the sum of two thousand pounds and seventeen shillings, debt—together with four guineas, costs——"

"To cut the matter short at once, sir," interrupted Mrs. Fitzherbert, "I have not the slightest means of settling this liability. You must therefore place an execution in the house—and I will forthwith apply to my friends."

"Beg pardon, ma'am," observed Crimp; "but you altogether mistake the natur' of this here business. Don't the lady, Jack?"

"No wonder—since you've took all this time to explain it," said the man, with sulky laconism.

"Well, I'm blowed!" exclaimed Mr. Crimp crushing his hat under his arm with the sudden paroxysm of excitement into which his follower's audacious observation threw him. "Who the devil would have thought that the lady didn't understand the thing all along? Here's a *ca-sa.*, and all in order, ma'am: and now if you'll be so obleeging as to come along with me to Chancery Lane——"

A light broke in upon the brain of the unhappy lady—and the half-stifled shriek which burst from her lips cut short the garrulity of Mr. Nathan Crimp. Until within the last minute she had fancied that the officer's purpose was merely to put an execution into the house—a process to which she had not been altogether a stranger in her lifetime: but now that she found her personal freedom to be actually compromised and that it was her arrest which was contemplated, a sudden coldness struck to her heart—and unable altogether to subdue her feelings, she gave vent to that expression of anguish which interrupted the garrulity of the bailiff.

Falling back upon the sofa whence she had risen on discovering the presence of the intruders, Mrs. Fitzherbert actually thrust her handkerchief into her mouth to crush the emotions that were struggling for hysterical ebullition;—and Mr. Nathan Crimp, under the impression that she was about to faint away, rushed forward—pulled a brandy-flask from his pocket—and was about to make an attempt to pour some of the burning fluid down the throat of the elegant lady of quality, when his man Jack caught him by the arm, growling a savage remonstrance in his ear at the same time.

This little bye-play on the part of the bailiff and his follower had the effect of reminding Mrs. Fitzherbert of the necessity of maintaining her dignity in the presence of those men;—and, crushing her emotions with an almost superhuman effort, she turned towards Crimp, saying, "If I make you a handsome present, will you allow this process to stand over till to-morrow?"

"It can't be done, ma'am," was the prompt reply. "You see, the caption's made, and can't be unmade save and except by payment on the von hand or a discharge on the t'other. My man Jack is a witness to the caption being made aforesaid—and he can't un-witness it, as the sayin' is. Them's the difficulties, ma'am."

"But you will at least grant me a few hours to send to my friends and procure the money?" said Mrs. Fitzherbert, her tone becoming less imperious and her manner more conciliatory as the precise details of her position developed themselves one after another in all their painful and perplexing reality.

"Well, ma'am, I don't mind leaving my man Jack to keep you company for an hour or so, while you send round to your friends," observed Mr. Nathan Crimp, after a few moments' consideration. "But you see, I can't lose sight on you altogether—or else you ceases to be in custody, and that's as good as flight and escape on your part, whereby Rigden could go and fix the Sheriff for the whole debt."

"You mean me to understand, then," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, with difficulty restraining alike her indignation and her tears, but almost choking through the efforts which it cost her thus to dam up the natural flow of her feelings,—"you mean me to understand that either yourself or your follower must remain in charge of my person until I am securely lodged in——"

"My lock-up in Chancery Lane," added Crimp, finishing the sentence in the manner which the lady's emotions would not permit her to achieve.

"But you must at least allow me to retire to my own room and dress myself becomingly?" said the lady, feeling so truly wretched that she would have welcomed even Death at the moment, in whatever shape he might have chosen to appear.

"Beg pardon, ma'am," hastily ejaculated Mr. Crimp: "but not without my examining the room aforehand to see whether there's any inner doors leading elsewhere. And even supposing it's all right in that respeck, my man Jack must remain outside in the passage to see that you don't forget yourself and walk off to pay a morning visit—or go out shopping—or take a airin' in the park——"

"Enough—enough!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, the bitter cup of her humiliation being now, as she ancied, fall to overflowing.

But she was speedily destined to experience more poignant pangs—more mortifying rebuffs—and more distressing reverses.

CHAPTER CLXV.

THE LADY OF QUALITY AND HER DOMESTICS.

THERE was a long pause after Mrs. Fitzherbert had abruptly and imperiously cut short Mr. Nathan Crimp's speculations as to the course which she might pursue were she suffered to remain unwatched by either himself or his man. The unhappy lady revolved in her mind a thousand plans in a minute: but none appeared equal to the present emergency. For the case was urgent in the extreme: two thousand pounds must be paid at once—or to a lock-up house must she go.

While Mrs. Fitzherbert was thus deliberating upon her difficulties and the means of extricating herself therefrom,—and while Crimp was whispering aside to his man Jack that "the fine lady would have to go to quod arter all,"—the door was suddenly thrown open, and in bounced a tall, handsome, but bold-looking young woman, dressed in a very coquettish style. This was the principal lady's-maid in the establishment of Mrs. Fitzherbert, in whose service she had been for some years, and by whom she was regarded as a confidante and even friendly adviser.

"I am engaged at present, Alicia, you perceive—disagreeably engaged," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, somewhat surprised and annoyed at the unceremonious manner in which the abigail had burst into the apartment. "When I want you I will ring."

"Very good, ma'am—you *may* ring," exclaimed the lady's-maid, who had evidently made up her mind to put a bold and insolent front upon the matter which she had in hand: "but perhaps I shan't come."

"Alicia, *this* from *you*?" cried Mrs. Fitzherbert, who a minute before would have staked her soul upon the fidelity, attachment, and gratitude of a domestic whom she had ever treated with especial consideration.

"Well, ma'am, I don't mind saying this *is* from me," was the prompt reply. "But all I want is my wages, if you please, ma'am—eighteen months' arrears, besides thirty-four guineas of my little savings which you kindly offered to take care of for me, ma'am," continued the abigail, with a mixture of sarcasm and superciliousness in her tone and manner.

"Alicia, you *must* understand my present position," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, dashing away the tears which had started forth upon her long lashes, and speaking in an appealing tone. "You see these men—and you can comprehend their mission."

"Yes, ma'am, I see the men," rejoined Alicia, in a voice of dogged insolence: "and it's precisely because I *do* see them *here* that I want my wages and the money that's owing to me. I don't suppose a lady like you means to cheat a poor hard-working creature like me out of the pittance that happens to be due."

"Alicia, I am incapable of cheating any one," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, her countenance flushing with sudden indignation.

"I'm delighted to hear it, ma'am," observed the abigail, with the most provoking doggedness; "because it's a proof that you mean to pay me what's due and let me take myself off at once."

"Is it possible that you intend to desert me at this moment?" exclaimed the unhappy lady, who now felt as if all the world were abandoning her.

"I don't see how you can afford to keep me any longer, ma'am," was the answer; "and I really don't feel inclined either to work for nothing or keep myself when out at service."

Mrs. Fitzherbert passed her handkerchief hastily over her countenance and endeavoured to subdue her emotions sufficiently to give a calm and dignified response to the lady's-maid: but at the same instant the door was again opened—and the butler entered the room.

He was a sleek, stout, comfortable-looking man, of middle age, and attired with great precision in a black suit: but his shirt-frill, cravat, and wristbands were of the finest linen and most snowy whiteness.

Making a low bow, he advanced up to the sofa where his mistress was seated; and bending down towards her, said in a whispering tone fraught with the profoundest respect, "Would it be convenient, madam, for you to settle my little account?"

"What! *you* likewise have turned against me, Robinson?" cried Mrs. Fitzherbert, aloud.

"I do not deserve such a reproach, ma'am," answered the butler, in a soft tone and an insinuating manner. "But I must take leave to remind you, madam, with every sentiment of respect and every feeling of devotion, that I am responsible to the wine-merchant—the butcher—the baker—the grocer—and sundry other tradesmen; and that unless I liquidate their bills *this very morning*, ma'am, I shall be put to serious inconvenience ere night-fall."

"What do you mean, Robinson?" demanded the lady. "*You* are not responsible for my debts!"

"But these persons hold that I am, madam," replied the butler. "At all events, individuals in *my* situation do not choose to quarrel with individuals in *their's*—and consequently with all due submis-

sion and respect, I wish to see these little matters settled at once."

But before Mrs. Fitzherbert had time to make another comment upon the butler's demands, the door was thrown open again, and the coachman entered the room.

He was a short, stout, red-faced man, with small twinkling green eyes, and an air of dogged resolve apparent beneath the look of good-nature which first struck the observation. He wore the powdered wig and the gorgeous livery which a detestable fashion *then* imposed, and *still* imposes, upon that class of British serfs who belong to the grade of flunkeyism:—and always having hated the disgusting badge of slavery which he was compelled to wear, he was of a disposition by no means likely to allow an opportunity to pass of venting his spite upon any member, whether male or female, of that aristocratic class which upholds the system whereby a distinctive garb is given to the man-servant in the lordly dwelling as well as to the pauper in the workhouse or to the felon in the gaol.

Darting a rapid glance of inquiry upon the lady's-maid and the butler, and receiving from each of them as prompt a look expressive of a negative, the coachman made an awkward kind of a bow—for he was a clumsy man and had been engaged in Mrs. Fitzherbert's service solely on account of his obesity, fat persons being preferred by the rich folks for the office that he filled.

"Now, Matthews, what do *you* want?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, her indignation once more triumphing over her affliction and bringing the blood to her cheeks.

"Please, ma'am," was the response, delivered in a hoarse tone which was habitual with the man, "I waits upon you as a deppitation——"

"A what?" cried the lady, in unfeigned astonishment.

"A deppitation from the domestics which is now assembled down in the servants' hall," continued the coachman; "and bein' a deppitation from them——

"What does he mean, Robinson?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, turning towards the butler.

"He means a deputation, madam," replied the individual thus appealed to: then, all his former blandness of tone and manner changing into a cold reserve which the slightest provocation would push into a haughty insolence, the butler added, "And I really think, ma'am, with all due respect, that this is *not* the time to assume the airs of a great lady and affect ignorance of the man's meaning just because his pronunciation *may be* somewhat defective."

If a glance had the power to kill, the look which Mrs. Fitzherbert threw on the butler would have transfixed him on the spot. Had she been the recognised wife of the Prince of Wales—had she been in the full enjoyment of the title of "Her Royal Highness," she could not have assumed at the instant a more majestic bearing nor a mien of haughtier grandeur. Her brows arched more nobly—her carriage grew more queen-like—her bosom swelled more superbly,—and this was all the work of a single hour.

"And now, Matthews, what is it?" she demanded, turning once again towards the coachman.

"Please, ma'am," said this individual, "I come on the part of myself and them of my fellow-servants as isn't here now at this present speaking, but is anxiously waiting below for me to go back to them to report the success of my arrand. And what I have to say may be summed up in a werry few words—which is, ma'am, we hopes and expects you'll pay us all the arrears of vages which is doo to us."

And having thus delivered himself, the coachman cast a determined look around, not only upon his mistress, the butler, and the lady's-maid, but likewise upon the two bailiffs who were standing apart enjoying the scene which we are relating.

"I now perceive that your conduct towards me, is the result of a plan previously settled and resolved upon," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, sweeping her indignant glances around upon the three domestics: "for I did not fail to notice the look of intelligence which passed between you when Matthews first entered the room just now. That look asked as plainly as eyes can ever speak, whether *you*, Robinson, and *you*, Alicia, had been paid your demands upon me;—and the responsive glances which *you* both threw back, were significant of the negative. Now I am well aware that you are entitled to your wages—and I deeply, deeply regret that I cannot liquidate them in full at this moment. But I cannot: and even while explaining myself thus frankly, I must observe that the course which *you*, Robinson and Matthews, have adopted towards me is unmanly in the extreme—while *your* conduct, Alicia, is unfeeling to a degree. I have now no more to say—unless it be that I am going hence to a prison, but that in the course of this day or to-morrow, I will borrow from my friends enough to pay all I owe to my servants."

And Mrs. Fitzherbert, whose voice had begun to faulter only when she made so unmistakable an allusion to a debtor's gaol, now turned abruptly aside and concealed her face in her handkerchief.

"We are robbed as completely as if our pockets was picked!" exclaimed the coachman, at the top of his hoarse, rough voice, while he stamped his foot savagely down upon the floor.

"It's a dead take-in—a downright cheat," screamed the lady's-maid, in thrilling tones that vibrated with hysterical rage.

"Every sentiment of respect which I lately experienced towards Mrs. Fitzherbert, has now evaporated," said the butler; "and I must candidly and freely confess that I agree with the remarks which have fallen from Mr. Matthews and Miss Alicia. In a word, we are all the victims of a mere adventuress."

"The idea of such a pauperised upstart-creatur a venturin' to put a man like me into such a cussed toggery as this!" exclaimed the coachman, tossing his powdered wig indignantly on one side and throwing off his lace-bedizened coat on the other.

"A lady who takes a butler should be able to pay him," said Mr. Robinson: then, with all the bitterness of sarcasm which the natural malignity of his disposition could enable him to throw into his language, he observed, "Even the very lowest of kept women always pay their servants whom they are obliged to turn off because they themselves are turned off by their paramours."

"To be sure!" added Alicia: "the common street-walker takes care of her servants——"

"And therefore I'm sure the prostitute of fashionable life ought to do the same," remarked the butler

"Begone, vile wretches!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, starting from the mournful reverie into which she had fallen, and springing at the same time from the sofa, her whole frame quivering with indignation, her cheeks glowing with the hue of crimson, and her eyes lighting up into the brightest fires. "Begone, I say—and dare not to level your foul slander against me!"

"Hey-dey! what does all this mean?" cried Alicia. "Slander indeed! I suppose it's no slander to say that you lived with the Prince as his concubine——"

"And was bundled out neck and crop t'other day," observed the coachman.

"Like any cast-off slipper," added the butler.

"Oh! if I dared but proclaim the truth!" murmured the unhappy lady, flinging herself back upon the sofa and pressing her hands against her throbbing brows, as if she could thereby steady their violent pulsation. "Leave me—I beseech you to leave me! If you will not obey my wish as a command, you will grant it as an act of mercy," she said, in a more audible voice and with a manner expressive of urgent entreaty.

"Well, let us take ourselves off, Mr. Robinson," said Alicia. "I'm sure I don't know how I shall ever get a place again, after being in the service of such a characterless demirep as this."

"A harlot without even a pension!" observed the butler, in a tone of the deepest disgust: so that it is fair to suppose that Mrs. Fitzherbert would have appeared less blameable in his eyes had her name been foisted on the pension list, along with those of the Dukes of Grafton, St. Albans, Richmond, and Cleveland, and other nobles who enjoy the hereditary right of plundering the Public Treasury simply because they are descended from some of the lascivious wretches who prostituted their persons to that execrable monarch Charles the Second.

"Ah! 'tis a reg'lar break-up—a awful smash," observed the coachman, volunteering the remark by way of appendix to the last one which had fallen from the lips of the butler. "There's a many people will be ruined by this here woman's fall," he continued, pointing to Mrs. Fitzherbert; "and some poor wictims of creditors will go and drown or hang theirselves when they hears that everything has gone to pot and the lady herself laid up safe in lavendar. But that's the way with them strumpets which gives theirselves the airs of Royalty for a time and then tumbles down into their natral sphere. What wexes me most of all, is to think that I ever put on that cussed wig and this trumpery gew-gaw livery just to please the vanity of a creatur' as will come down to be a reglar street-walker arter all."

"Yes—and we shall yet see her picking oakum in Bridewell!" hysterically shrieked forth Miss Alicia as she bounced out of the room.

"Having no sentiment of respect left, and wondering that I could ever have entertained any at all," said the butler, "I not only echo the anticipation of the last speaker, but likewise confidently hope to see it speedily fulfilled."

"And now we may all take ourselves off, as thoroughly swindled and robbed as ever a set of poor hard-working devils was," growled the coachman.

But Mrs. Fitzherbert's ears caught not these volleys let off by the retiring enemy—for she had fainted!

When she returned to consciousness she found herself lying upon the sofa, with Mr. Nathan Crimp bending over her and sprinkling water on her countenance—while his man Jack held the basin into which the bailiff thrust his dirty fingers in order to switch off the drops of the cooling element in the most convenient manner.

Hastily and somewhat haughtily thanking the two officers for their attention, Mrs. Fitzherbert begged them to grant her an hour's grace ere they insisted on her removal to a lock-up house;—and this boon being accorded, she penned half-a-dozen letters to intimate friends, whose pecuniary succour she earnestly requested "to save her from a most painful difficulty."

But when she rang the bell for the purpose of despatching her servants with those missives, Mr. Nathan Crimp very candidly informed her that she need not expect any response to the summons, inasmuch as the domestics had one and all quitted the house while Mrs. Fitzherbert was lying in a state of unconsciousness. The lady's cheeks flushed with indignation for a few moments, and then became ghastly pale, as she bit her quivering lip: tears also started forth upon her cheeks,—tears of mingled humiliation and rage—and not the first tears, either, which she had shed that morning!

Yes—it was indeed true: every one of the servants had departed, with a previous intimation to Mr. Crimp that they should send for their boxes in the course of the day;—and thus was Mrs. Fitzherbert's house as completely and as suddenly abandoned by all the dependants as if the plague had manifested itself in her own person.

Mr. Nathan Crimp now offered to take the letters for Mrs. Fitzherbert and await the answers at the houses where they were to be delivered; and to this proposal she was glad to assent. The bailiff's follower was however left behind to keep a strict watch upon the lady; and thus was the brilliant Mrs. Fitzherbert,—the wife of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales—the lately courted, worshipped, adored genius of the fashionable world,—thus was she, we say, deserted by her dependants and left to such care as a bailiff and his man might choose to take of her!

CHAPTER CLXVI.

THE LADY OF QUALITY'S ARISTOCRATIC ACQUAINTANCES.

ALTHOUGH Mr. Nathan Crimp saw as plainly as possible that Mrs. Fitzherbert's circumstances were in a very desperate condition, yet he was shrewd enough to calculate that a lady who had occupied such an elevated position in the fashionable world could not be utterly destitute of friends or denuded of resources; and he therefore saw every chance of being well remunerated for any little services he might perform or any indulgences he might allow.

The instinct of rats teaches them to abandon a house which is on the point of falling; and thus did the selfishness of the menials prompt them to hurry away from the scene of the crashing fortunes of their mistress. This fact had certainly led Mr. Crimp to believe that the break-up with Mrs. Fitzherbert was complete: but still, as we have observed, he felt pretty certain of recompense for his own services.

Provided therefore with the half-dozen letters, Mr. Nathan Crimp set out on the mission which he had undertaken; and, calling a coach, he ordered himself to be driven in the first instance to Lady Singleton's mansion in Clarges Street.

On alighting at the splendid abode, Mr. Crimp knocked and rang in a somewhat authoritative manner: for he considered that he was now performing the part of Mrs. Fitzherbert's *friend* and therefore derived a certain dignity from that position.

"Well, what is it, my man?" demanded the hall-porter, surveying Mr. Crimp with a somewhat suspicious eye.

"Is your missus at home?" asked the bailiff, assuming a look and manner of awful importance.

"D'ye mean the housekeeper or cook—which?" exclaimed the hall-porter, pursing up his mouth pompously when he had put the question.

"I mean Lady Singleton — that's which," responded Mr. Crimp. "So you'll just be so kind as to give her this here dokiment—you may take your davy it isn't a writ—and tell her as how the genelman which brought it is a-waiting her ladyship's pleasure."

"What name shall I say?" inquired the hall-porter.

"What name—sir? Nathan Crimp, if you must know," was the prompt reply.

The countenance and manner of the hall-porter changed in an instant: it was ice suddenly thawing—or rather turning into the most dulcet honey. For the fact was that the man understood the bailiff's answer to be precisely this:—"What name? Sir Nathan Crimp, if you must know." The consequence was that the liveried functionary was seized with the conviction that the shabby-looking visitor was some eccentric baronet not over particular in his toilette, but probably very rich;—and he therefore, without any more ado, ushered the sheriff's-officer up into the drawing-room—throwing open the door and bawling out in the usually ceremonial manner, "Sir Nathan Crimp!"

Lady Singleton was the widow of a baronet whose family was distinctly traceable back (thanks to the inventive genius of certain clever dealers in vanity-fictions at the Heralds' College) to the reign of William Rufus. Her ladyship was now in her fiftieth year; and when inheriting her late husband's immense fortune, she had carefully preserved all his ancestral pride likewise. She was childless: some distant relative of her deceased husband had succeeded to the baronetcy, while she secured all the broad lands and the hoarded cash; and she was therefore on the look out for a new matrimonial venture.

At the precise moment when the bailiff was so pompously announced by the hall-porter as Sir Nathan Crimp, Lady Singleton was seated in the drawing-room with her "toady," or "companion." A toady, or companion, is a poor gentlewoman who wants a home and everything else, and is therefore glad to accept all those requisites upon conditions which, if not absolutely specified in a verbal or written contract, are generally understood. For a toady must be a woman of cheerful disposition, or at least must invariably seem to be cheerful: she must never give way to bad spirits—never have a headache—never be out of sorts—never grumble at anything—never be discontented. On the contrary she must be satisfied with everything that the lady with whom she lives may say or do: she must never contradict—never have an opinion of her own—never see with her own eyes, nor hear with her own ears, nor think with her own mind: in fact, she must perform all those functions through the organs and senses of her patroness. She must always be prepared to go out when the lady goes out, or stay at home when the lady stays at home: she must nurse and coddle the lady when she is ill, and put up with all her caprices, whims, and fancies when she is well. She must always be ready to become a scapegoat, as well as an object against which her patroness may vent a passing ill-humour: she must carry the prayer-book to church on Sunday, and hold the lap-dog on her knees in the carriage;—and she must take excellent care not to draw towards herself that admiration or those attentions on the part of the other sex which are looked upon as the rightful monopoly of her patroness. These are the duties and functions of a toady; and for the discharge of the same she is lodged, fed, salaried, and rewarded with cast-off gowns into the bargain.

Lady Singleton, then, was with Miss Jukes, her "companion," when the bailiff was announced. Miss Jukes was forty-two years of age—short, stumpy, fat, and good-humoured: Lady Singleton was tall, scraggy, and prim. The high-sounding name of Sir Nathan Crimp made them both start;—and when they fixed their eyes upon the dirty, half-shabby, and half-flashy appearance of the bailiff, they were rather shocked for a moment. But the same thought which had already struck the hall-porter, simultaneously sprang up in the minds of those ladies; and they accordingly concluded that the visitor must be some eccentric baronet or knight, whose enormous wealth was perhaps so notorious as to counteract any disagreeable results which might arise to himself in consequence of the neglect apparent in his toilette.

The hall-porter placed a chair for the bailiff's accommodation, and then withdrew. Crimp seated himself on the edge of the chair—crushed his hat nervously between his knees—plucked up a spirit—and said, "Beg pardon, ladies—but I'm a friend of Mrs. Fitzherbert, which is a lady not unbeknown to you——"

The widow and Miss Jukes exchanged rapid glances, as much as to say, "What extraordinary English our new friend talks:" but the announcement that he was a friend of Mrs. Fitzherbert disarmed them of any suspicion which the little grammatical solecisms might have engendered concerning him.

"And pray how is that dear lady?" inquired Miss Jukes. "It is a week since you saw your excellent friend Mrs. Fitzherbert," added the toady, turning towards Lady Singleton.

"It is, my dear," responded the wealthy widow. "I have been very neglectful in not calling upon her: but really what with Lady Pooke's card-party—the Honourable Mrs. Dulcimer's drum—the Countess of Blandingford's rout——"

"Oh! yes, indeed, my dear Lady Singleton, you have been so very, very gay during the past week!" exclaimed Miss Jukes. "But then, you know, you are so much sought after—such a favourite——"

"Well, perhaps I am, my dear," said Lady Sin-

gleton, complacently. "Society is very kind to me—society spoils me—I am its pet child——"

"Raythor a old child—up'ards of fifty, I take it," muttered Crimp to himself.

"What did you say, Sir Nathan?" inquired Lady Singleton, with a bland smile that showed her false teeth.

"I was a-saying, ma'am, that I shouldn't have took your ladyship to be more than five or six and thirty—there or thereabouts," responded the bailiff.

"Well, I never!" ejaculated Miss Jukes, as if lost in amazement. "Did you ever know such an accurate guess? Really, Sir Nathan, you must be quite a wizard to have hit so fully upon the truth respecting my dear Lady Singleton's age."

"Lord bless ye, ma'am," cried Mr. Crimp, winking at Miss Jukes in a very knowing manner; "I'm one of the downiest coves at that there kind of thing in all England. But about our dear Mrs. Fitzherbert—I s'pose you've both on you the greatest esteem and respeck for that lady."

"I would go to the end of the world to serve her!" exclaimed Lady Singleton, emphatically.

"And I'll be bound to say t'other lady would go to the devil for the same purpose!" remarked the bailiff, pointing his dirty fore-finger at Miss Jukes.

"I certainly would go very great lengths for Mrs. Fitzherbert," said the toady: then, getting up under pretence of poking the fire, she whispered rapidly in the ears of her patroness, "Depend upon it this is a sporting baronet—a regular country squire."

"Just so, my dear," returned Lady Singleton, in the same low and quick tone. "Very vulgar—but very rich, I dare say."

Miss Jukes looked her assent to this opinion on the part of her patroness and resumed her seat.

"By the bye," said Lady Singleton, "I wonder whether it can be really true that Mrs. Fitzherbert has broken altogether with the Prince—or whether she has merely taken a separate establishment in consequence of the approaching marriage of his Royal Highness? Which do you think it is, my dear?" asked the lady, appealing to Miss Jukes.

"I should really like to hear *your* opinion first, my beloved friend," said the companion, in a tone of deferential entreaty.

"Well—I will frankly confess that I think the separation is only feigned on account of the approaching marriage," replied Lady Singleton.

"And I agree with you perfectly," exclaimed Miss Jukes, who would have said precisely the same had her patroness adopted the other opinion upon the subject. "And now perhaps Sir Nathan will give us *his* ideas——"

"We'll come to that pint in a moment, ladies," interrupted the sheriff's-officer. "I'm quite delighted to hear that your friendship for Mrs Fitzherbert is so great——"

"There is no sacrifice I would not make for her," exclaimed Lady Singleton. "She should command all my fortune, were she ever unfortunately placed in a situation to require such a manifestation of my love and esteem. You know, Miss Jukes, that I am sincere in what I now say."

"I can conscientiously bear testimony to the truth of your ladyship's declarations," said the toady; "and no one can appreciate more deeply than myself the value, fidelity, and generous disinterestedness of your ladyship's friendship. In fact,—I do not say it to flatter your ladyship—because I hate flattery——"

"I know you do, my dear," observed the wealthy widow, quite seriously. "But do tell me what you were about to say, even if it were to reproach me with some fault or failing."

"Well, my dear friend," resumed Miss Jukes, adopting a tone of bland remonstrance and a look of gentle deprecation,—"I *am* going to be candid with you, and I *am* about to reproach you with a fault. In fact, you have one very great failing—and that is, you are *too* generous. You will really ruin yourself outright if you go on in this manner. Your purse is constantly open—your hand is always in your pocket. A friend requires a loan—a poor relation craves assistance—the miserable and wretched of the lower orders beseech eleemosynary assistance,—and you never refuse;—I do believe you could not say '*Nay*.' Now I think, Sir Nathan," added Miss Jukes, turning towards the sheriff's-officer, "you will admit with me that her ladyship *does* possess a very great failing, and that I was in the right to reproach her with it even at the risk of her friendship."

"Well, I don't think her ladyship will feel herself so aggrawated as to get up and punch your head for them remarks," said the bailiff, who did not however see through the disgusting flattery and sickening fulsomeness of Miss Jukes' proceeding. "But I'm as happy as a sand-boy to hear that her ladyship is so unkimmon generous: 'cos vy, if you'll on'y just read that there letter which the flunkey laid on the table——"

"I did not perceive any letter, Sir Nathan," exclaimed Lady Singleton. "Did you, Miss Jukes?"

"Oh! here it is," cried the toady, picking it up from the carpet on which it had fallen. "It is addressed to your ladyship, and is in the never-to-be-forgotten but ever-to-be-admired handwriting of our beloved friend Mrs. Fitzherbert."

"Be so kind as to read it, my dear," said Lady Singleton.

"Certainly," returned Miss Jukes, with a most amiable smile: and she proceeded to read the contents aloud in the ensuing manner:—

"I know, my dearest Lady Singleton, that you will be surprised to receive from me such a request as the one I am about to make: but I likewise feel that I may address myself in full confidence to your friendship. I have not time to enter into particulars: but I will explain everything when we next meet. What I require is the loan of a couple of thousand guineas for a week or ten days, to save me from a most painful difficulty."

"Good heavens! is this possible?" exclaimed Lady Singleton, snatching the note from the hands of the toady. "Yes—here is her signature: and 'tis her handwriting beyond all possibility of doubt! To what difficulty does she allude, Sir Nathan?—and why cannot you advance the money, since you are an intimate friend and doubtless a rich man?"

"I advance the blunt!" cried Crimp, throwing himself back in his chair and bursting into an uproarious fit of laughter. "Well, I'm damned if ever I heard anything better than that. By jingo! it beats cock-fighting hollow! I advance the tin!—ha! ha! ha!"

"And wherefore should you not, Sir Nathan?" demanded lady Singleton, now looking uncommonly demure, and even exchanging a suspicious glance with Miss Jukes.

"Why, because it would be rayther too good," responded Crimp. "But I suppose you'll make no difficulty in writing out a cheque which I'll run off and get keshed at the bänker's at once——"

"You are really very accommodating, sir," interrupted Lady Singleton. "Don't you think he is, Miss Jukes?"

"I never knew any one more so," answered the companion.

"Come, now—no palavering about the matter," exclaimed Crimp. "You've told me how much you love Mrs. Fitzherbert—and how you'd sacrifice all your fortune to do her a service—and now the opportunity presents itself. 'Cos I'll be very candid with you, ma'am—and therefore the truth is that there's a writ out agin Mrs. Fitzherbert for two thousand pounds and odd; and if so be she don't settle in an hour or so, she'll have to go to a lock-up."

"Then her rupture with the Prince *is* complete?" cried Lady Singleton and Miss Jukes, as if speaking in the same breath.

"I'm afeard it be," said Crimp. "The more's the pity—'cos now the dear lady's on'y chance is in the good feelin's of her friends——"

"And pray, Sir Nathan, why do *you* not pay the money, I ask once more?" exclaimed Lady Singleton, drawing her prim form up to the full extent of its demure lankiness.

"I can't make out why you and t'other lady keep on calling me *Sir* Nathan," said Crimp: "'cos you'd better know the truth at vonce, and then you'll see why it isn't possible for *me* to come down with the stumpy. In a vord, then, I'm the hofficer which has made the caption—and my man has got Mrs. Fitzherbert in custody at this present speaking. Now, then——"

"What! you are not a baronet, then?" shrieked Lady Singleton, starting to her feet and surveying Mr. Nathan Crimp with mingled disgust and suspicion.

"Nor even a knight?" screamed Miss Jukes, rushing to the bell.

"Neither von nor t'other—and be damned to them!" was Mr. Crimp's very emphatic ejaculation. "But what is all this pother about?"

"Leave the room, sir!" cried Lady Singleton.

"Yes—be off with you!" exclaimed Miss Jukes, ringing the bell frantically.

"But what answer shall I convey back to Mrs. Fitzherbert?" demanded Crimp, dismayed at the sudden turn which the aspect of affairs had taken.

"I deeply regret, sir, that I have no money to lend," said Lady Singleton, in a severe tone. "Mrs. Fitzherbert is an extravagant woman—and she must pay the penalty of her thoughtlessness."

"To be sure!" cried Miss Jukes. "It serves her quite right."

"She is a proud upstart," continued Lady Singleton.

"And therefore her fall is merited," observed the toady."

"She can go to prison, for anything I care," exclaimed the worthy lady.

"And she may rot there too, without my breaking my heart on her account," added Miss Jukes.

At this moment the door was opened—and the hall-porter, accompanied by two tall footmen in gorgeous liveries, rushed into the room, the violent ringing of the bell having alarmed them.

"Turn that person out of the house," exclaimed Lady Singleton, pointing with unmitigated disgust at the bailiff. "He is an impostor."

"A thorough impostor," echoed Miss Jukes.

"And if Mrs. Fitzherbert should call or send," continued Lady Singleton, "mind that I am not at home."

"And never shall be at home any more to Mrs. Fitzherbert or any one from her," added Miss Jukes, with a look of bland appeal to her patroness.

"Quite correct, my dear," said Lady Singleton, tossing her head indignantly. "I always thought that Mrs. Fitzherbert was a low creature and no credit as an acquaintance."

"Yes—and you always said as much to me, I am sure," cried Miss Jukes. "The airs that she has given herself!—and the way she has come down! It's quite a judgment on her for her frailty," added Miss Jukes, who had three bastard children living at a farm-house in the country.

"You're right, my dear—it's a visitation of Providence on her head for her sins," remarked Lady Singleton, whose profligacy in her younger days was notorious to all but her besotted husband: and he, good easy man, believed her to be a paragon of virtue.

But we must leave this immaculate lady and her equally well-principled "companion" to pass their comments upon the fallen Mrs. Fitzherbert, while we follow Mr. Nathan Crimp, who, having been very unceremoniously bundled out of Lady Singleton's mansion, proceeded in the hackney-coach to the not less splendid abode of the Dowager-Marchioness of Banbury in Park Lane.

During the ride thither Mr. Crimp revolved in his mind which was the best course to adopt; and it struck him that on this occasion he would represent himself as the mere messenger entrusted with a confidential communication, and in that capacity await the result. Accordingly, on arriving at the gate of Lady Banbury's superb dwelling, he gave a modest ring, and assumed no airs when questioned by a porter clad in such a radiant livery that if the sun had happened to be shining at the time the presence of that magnificent specimen of flunkeyism must have been perfectly bewildering.

"Walk in, my good fellow," said this tremendous individual, addressing Mr. Crimp with the most patronising urbanity. "Sit down in the hall—don't be afraid—we shan't eat you up—although I dessay the appearance of such a place *must* be rather overpowering to one unaccustomed to such splendour. Ah! poor man, I pity you—dweller in some back alums as you no doubt are!"

"It's exceedin' kind of you to sympathise with me," observed Mr. Crimp, who could have said if he had chosen that he had a well furnished house of his own in Chancery Lane: but as he was resolved to try the effect of humility in the present instance, he followed the porter into the marble hall with as much apparent deference as a pauper is compelled to show to the pompous beadle who conducts the wretched being to the workhouse.

"And now where's the letter?" demanded the porter.

"Here, sir," replied Mr. Nathan Crimp.

The countenance of the porter brightened up in an instant when he heard himself addressed as "Sir;" and, patting Mr. Crimp upon the shoulder in a paternal manner, he said, "Now I'll be bound that you'd like to obtain an audience of the Marchioness herself?"

"I should indeed," was the bailiff's prompt reply.

"You shall, then, my good feller—you shall, I can assure you," resumed the porter. "Here, George!" he cried, raising his voice to its highest key.

"What is it?" demanded a handsome youth of about sixteen or seventeen, and who was dressed as a page. "Did you call, Mr. Blossom?" he said, as he emerged from a waiting-room that opened from the marble hall.

"Georgey, my boy!" said the porter, who appeared to rejoice in the name of Blossom, "you will have the kindness to conduct this individual into the presence of her ladyship. He has an important communication to make to her."

"Very good, Mr. Blossom," said the handsome page. "Follow me, my man," he observed, turning towards Crimp.

Up a splendid staircase they went—across a landing crowded with statues, vases, and pictures—along a passage lighted from the ceiling—and then into an ante-chamber where a couple of pages as handsome and as elegantly clad as George himself, were lounging before the fire. One leaf of a pair of folding-doors was instantaneously thrown open by Crimp's guide; and the bailiff was ushered into a magnificent drawing-room, where an elderly lady was seated alone at one of the tables interspersed about.

The page advanced with noiseless step towards her—made a low obeisance—and said, "May it please your ladyship, a person has called upon some important business."

The lady raised her eyes—darted a rapid and scarcely perceptible look of mingled fondness and lascivious intelligence upon the beautiful youth—and then fixed her eyes upon Mr. Nathan Crimp, who respectfully placed Mrs. Fitzherbert's letter before her.

The handsome page withdrew;—and the bailiff now found himself alone with the Dowager Marchioness of Banbury. She was a lady in her fiftieth year, retaining all the traces of a beauty

that must have been transcendantly marvellous in her youthful days, but with a countenance modelled in a style that denoted the strongest passions. This sensuality of facial outline and general expression was however moderated, though not altogether subdued, by the unassuming—indeed, the extremely plain apparel which the Marchioness wore: and that comparative homeliness of dress contrasted strangely with the costly elegance which characterised the spacious apartment wherein she was seated.

"What is your business, my good man?" she inquired, in a soft voice and mild demeanour.

"Please your ladyship, I've brought this here letter from Mrs. Fitzherbert," said Mr. Nathan Crimp: "and as it's private and confidential——"

"Ah! I understand," interrupted the Marchioness, her whole countenance becoming suddenly animated with delight. "Then you are doubtless acquainted with the nature of its contents?"

"To be sure I be, your ladyship," was the response.

"And the favour, then, is granted—and the two thousand guineas will be accepted?" exclaimed the Marchioness, speaking in a confidential tone.

"How on earth could your ladyship guess——"

"Hush! not a word!" said the dowager, putting her finger upon her lip, while the sheriff's officer, stopping short in his exclamations, gazed upon the lady with open-mouthed, staring, stolid, wonder. "Sit down, my good man—sit down," she said, pointing towards a chair: "you are evidently a person enjoying the confidence of my beloved, valued, and very dearest friend, Mrs. Fitzherbert. I suppose, therefore, that you occupy some situation in her household?—or, perhaps," added the Marchioness, lowering her voice to the most mysterious whisper,—"perhaps you are employed in the War Office?"

"Not quite *that*, ma'am," responded Mr. Nathan Crimp: "although I do hold a hofficial capacity, as the sayin' is——"

"Ah! I thought as much!" ejaculated the Marchioness, looking very sly and very cunning indeed: then, as she took up the letter which the bailiff had laid upon the table, she said, "Well, I am really delighted to think that Mrs. Fitzherbert should have used such despatch in complying with my request. It is a proof of friendship on her part which I shall never, never forget; and she may always rely upon my gratitude in return. Indeed, without this proof of her good feeling, I should ever have remained the most devoted—the most sincere—the most faithful of her friends. And I am still more charmed at the promptitude of her compliance with my request, inasmuch as it fully proves the falsity of the idle tittle-tattle which is now current concerning her, and which represents the rupture between herself and the Prince as complete: whereas I all along declared my firm conviction to be that it was only a concession judiciously made to public opinion, on the eve of an event which so closely regards the national interests—I mean the approaching marriage of his Royal Highness with the Princess Caroline of Brunswick."

"I'm very much afeared that your ladyship is labouring under some mistake or another," said Mr. Nathan Crimp, who had listened with increasing bewilderment to the long speech just delivered.

"What mistake?—how can there be any error?" exclaimed the Marchioness of Banbury, now puzzled in her turn. "The matter is as plain and simple as possible; and since you are a person enjoying the confidence of my beloved friend Mrs. Fitzherbert, I will explain it to you in a moment. Then the two thousand pounds shall be immediately forthcoming——"

"That's exactly what I want, please your ladyship," cried the bailiff, chuckling at the thought of fingering so much coin and indulging in the gratifying expectation of receiving from Mrs. Fitzherbert at least a twenty-pound note for himself.

"Well, then, you see that there can be no error," resumed the Marchioness: "because if you are empowered to receive the amount just named, it is quite clear that the transaction is complete—and this note, which dear Mrs. Fitzherbert has sent me by you and which I will now at once proceed to open, unquestionably contains the intelligence——".

"It relates to the two thousand guineas, sure enough," exclaimed Mr. Crimp. "But as for any service in return—or any transaction completed—I'm as entirely at sea as your ladyship seems to be yourself."

"This is most extraordinary!" cried the dowager. "Do let us understand each other, even before I open this letter. It will be much better."

"So I think, ma'am," observed Mr. Nathan Crimp. "Well, then—you speak fust, and tell me what *your* notion of the business is."

"It lies in a nutshell, my good man," said her ladyship. "The day before yesterday I wrote to Mrs. Fitzherbert requesting her to use her great influence to obtain a regiment for my second son, Lieutenant-Colonel Lord Willesden. In that note I hinted that if Mrs. Fitzbert knew any poor person to whom she would like to present a couple of thousand pounds, that sum should be placed at her disposal for such a purpose. And now therefore, you perceive that the transaction is doubtless completed—and that you have been sent to give a receipt for the amount just named."

"Then your ladyship was never more mistaken in your life," exclaimed Crimp; "although I dessay that if you will only assist Mrs. Fitzherbert in her present troubles, she'll get your son made not only a Colonel, but also a Harchbishop, whenever she rekivers her power over the Prince."

"What do I hear?—what do you mean?" cried the Dowager-Marchioness of Banbury, rising from her seat and now drawing herself up with all the stately haughtiness which England's insolent Aristocracy know so well how to assume. "Mrs. Fitzherbert has lost her influence, you say?—and she is involved in troubles?"

"Terrible ones, may it please your ladyship," exclaimed Crimp. "But be so kind as so peroge her letter."

"It is scarcely necessary," observed the Marchioness, tossing the missive away from her with mingled aversion and disgust. "You can tell me in a few words what the woman wants with me, although I now more than half suspect."

"She hopes and trusts that your ladyship, for friendship's sake, will lend her a couple of thousand guineas for a foo days," exclaimed Mr.

Crimp, in as meek and humble a tone as he could possibly bring himself to adopt—although he had a presentiment that his visit to the Marchioness would prove at last as abortive as his appeal to Lady Singleton.

"Friendship!" ejaculated the Dowager, her face becoming purple with anger. "How dared the upstart Mrs. Fitzherbert to represent herself as the friend of the Marchioness of Banbury? No—thank God! there was never any friendship between *us*. I tolerated the woman—and that was all. But I always despised her vanity and foresaw that her pride would have a fall; and I am glad that the catastrophe has occurred. It will be a lesson to such women in future. Indeed I am very much to blame that I ever permitted a person of such a loose character and such disreputable morals to cross *my* threshold. Good morning to you!"

And the Marchioness stalked away, with the majestic bearing of an empress, to the farther end of the room, while Mr. Crimp sneaked off as discomfited and crest-fallen as he well could be.

On regaining the hackney-coach, he was on the point of desiring the driver to return to Mrs. Fitzherbert's house—for he had no courage to apply in any other quarter on her behalf: but a second thought prompting him to give the experimental affair one more trial, he hastily examined the addresses of the four remaining letters, and selected the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery as the next personage to be applied to. Mr. Nathan Crimp accordingly drove to Grafton Street; and on alighting at the splendid mansion to which the reader has been already introduced on a former occasion, he rang the bell—delivered the letter—and quietly seated himself in the hall to await the result.

A quarter of an hour elapsed—and at the expiration of this interval the footman who had taken charge of the note, reappeared with a request that Mrs. Fitzherbert's messenger would step up-stairs. This invitation struck Mr. Crimp as a favourable augury: and it was with considerable alacrity that he followed the gorgeously-clad domestic to an apartment where the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery was seated in company with half-a-dozen ladies of rank and fashion.

The Dowager-Countess herself was a very fine woman, considering her age, which was assuredly verging towards sixty, despite of the exquisite skill wherewith the appliances of art were used to conceal the ravages of time. In her earlier years she must have been as eminently handsome as the Marchioness of Banbury; indeed every feature of her countenance and every contour of her person retained the traces of former beauty. Her large dark eyes were piercing as arrows and still full of fire; and in her face was reflected the indomitable decision of her character. Haughty, proud, selfish, and unprincipled, she was one of those heartless women who care not, so long as they can achieve the aggrandizement of their families, if millions of hard-working Englishmen should perish of starvation. She was, indeed, a veritable type of the British peeress—narrow-minded, prejudiced, intolerant, luxurious, avaricious, extravagant, and cold-blooded to a degree. In her younger days she had been an intriguant in love: now she meddled in politics. She hated "the people" as cordially as she could: she firmly believed in the divine right of Kings; she looked upon Charles I as a *martyr*—and she thought that the "lower orders" were only fitted to remain the serfs and slaves of the "upper classes." And these are the sentiments of ninety-nine out of every hundred ladies in the higher grades of English society.

On the present occasion, the Dowager-Countess had several titled visitresses staying with her in Grafton Street. They were all of high rank and great wealth; and they therefore despised every one who had not the same claims to consideration. The pride of each was sufficient to fill infinite space; the virtue of each might be compressed without much difficulty into the smallest pill-box. For be it well understood—and we proclaim this as our honest, sincere, and deliberate conviction—that, with a few honourable exceptions—the titled ladies of this land are the most lascivious demireps in morals, the vilest hypocrites in religion, the most ostentatious counterfeits in their so-called benevolence, the most heartless tyrants to their inferiors, and the most cordial haters of the working-classes that can possibly exist. Prudes in seeming, they are generally prostitutes in sooth; and the scandalous laxity of their morals is displayed by the fact that numbers of the proudest families in the aristocratic sphere make a glory and a boast of being descended from the shameless and disgusting harlots who flourished as the mistresses of Charles II.

But to continue. It was in the splendid apartment where the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery was seated with her guests, that Mr. Nathan Crimp was shown. He was taken considerably aback on finding himself thus suddenly ushered into the presence of four or five elderly ladies all wearing huge turbans, and seated in a kind of awful grandeur upon the crimson velvet sofas—while three or four younger ladies were grouped in the bay-window and reading Mrs. Fitzherbert's letter with very great attention. But Mr. Crimp made his politest bow—ran his fingers through his greasy hair—crushed his hat under his arm—and endeavoured to look at his ease, though in reality he felt as uncomfortable as if he were going forth on a public scaffold to be hanged.

"Pray what is your name, my man?" asked the most majestic-looking lady of the whole assemblage, and whom the bailiff therefore instantaneously set down in his own mind as the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery.

"My name's Crimp—Nathan Crimp, at your ladyship's service," was the prompt reply.

"And pray what has happened to our dear friend Mrs. Fitzherbert?" inquired the Dowager-Countess. "She alludes to some difficulty of a painful nature; and we are all dying with suspense to learn the sad truth."

"Well, it is sad enow, heaven knows," exclaimed Mr. Crimp, flattering himself that he had at last fallen in with sympathetic souls and that the advance of pecuniary supplies would necessarily follow.

"I suppose, then, that the dear creature—I mean, our excellent friend, Mrs. Fitzherbert—has altogether broken off with a certain illustrious personage?" remarked one of the ladies, apparently addressing herself to the Dowager-Countess, but in reality levelling her observation in an interrogatory sense at Mr. Nathan Crimp.

"I dare say this person can tell you, my dear Lady Brunel," said the Dowager-Countess; "for he seems to be in the confidence of our unfortunate friend."

"Well, ladies, I'm afeard there ain't much doubt on that pint," observed Mr. Crimp. "The truth is, you see, Mrs. Fitzherbert is regularly done up just for the moment; and the little request she makes in that there letter which them there young ladies is a-perooging, will save her from a werry orkard dilemmy, if so be the favour which she rekvires is granted."

"Oh! we will attend to that part of the matter all in due time," exclaimed the Dowager-Countess, assuming a tone and look of such remarkable condescension that Mr. Nathan Crimp felt as certain relative to the two thousand guineas as if he had them already buttoned up in his breeches'-pocket.

"What her ladyship wishes," said one of the elderly dames, likewise speaking in a bland tone and also unbending amazingly from the prim stateliness and icy rigidity which seemed natural to her;—"what her ladyship wishes," she repeated, glancing towards the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery, "is to receive a full, frank, and candid explanation of those painful embarrassments which she is so urgently called upon to alleviate."

"Nothing can be more fairer or more straightfor'ard," exclaimed the sheriff's officer. "Well, then, the truth is, saving your ladyship's presence, that there's a writ out agin Mrs. Fitzherbert for two thousand guineas and up'ards, and all her servants has bolted off like shots, leaving the poor lady in a awful state."

"God bless me!" ejaculated the Dowager-Countess, shaking her head ominously. "How I do pity her, the poor dear creature!"

"I really could cry," exclaimed Lady Brunel.

"And I am crying," said the elderly dame who had just now spoken; "it is heart-breaking!" she added, applying her handkerchief to her eyes.

The greatest sensation certainly prevailed in that room; and while the elder ladies manifested the most absorbing interest in Mr. Nathan Crimp's communications, the younger ones gathered nearer to him in order not to lose a word that might fall from his lips.

"And so our dearest friend is thus cruelly abandoned by all the world?" said the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery.

"If it wasn't for my man Jack which is bearin' her company," returned Mr. Crimp, "she would be all alone in that house of her'n at this blessed minute."

"Ah! you have a man there, then?" exclaimed Lady Brunel, who was the first to suspect what Mr. Crimp's calling really was, her eldest son having more than once fallen into the hands of the harpies of the law and she having visited him in a sponging-house on one occasion.

"Yes—my man's at Mrs. Fitzherbert's," said Crimp: "and if the debt isn't paid presently, she'll have to go to my lock-up in Chancery Lane. That's the naked truth, ladies—savin' your presence——"

"Pray who are you, my good man?" demanded the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery: "for you seem to take so deep an interest in everything which concerns my dear friend Mrs. Fitzherbert——"

"I do suspect he's what's called a sheriff's officer," whispered Lady Brunel.

"I should faint at the bare notion," shrieked the elderly lady who a minute ago had pretended to whimper in commiseration of Mrs. Fitzherbert's misfortunes. "Pray put me out of suspense at once, and ask that dreadful man what he really is."

"Who are you?" demanded Lady Brunel, addressing the query in a somewhat sharp and imperious tone to Mr. Crimp.

"I'm the bailiff what's arrested Mrs. Fitzherbert," was the answer; "and its out of sheer good natur' and 'cos I pities her case that I've gone the rounds of her friends to see what they'll do for her."

"Ah! then you have been elsewhere this morning on Mrs. Fitzherbert's behalf?" exclaimed the Dowager-Countess interrogatively.

"Indeed I have, may it please your ladyship—and with no success at all," said Crimp, wondering how much longer it would be ere the expected loan was forthcoming.

"Pray where have you been, my man?" asked Lady Brunel; and every head was now stretched forward with eager curiosity to enable the ear to catch every syllable of Crimp's reply whatever it might be.

"I went fust to Lady Singleton—next to the Marchioness of Banbury—and now I'm here," he said, in a measured manner: "and I hope and expect that I've got the right sow by the tail at last."

"What *does* the fellow mean?" exclaimed the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery, suddenly throwing off the mask of mildness and assuming a demeanour full of indignation. "But it is just like the insufferable impertinence of Mrs. Fitzherbert to send such a coarse vulgarian on her beggarly messages."

"She's fallen from her pedestal at last!" ejaculated Lady Brunel.

"And she will never remount it again," observed the elderly lady who was whimpering at one moment, fainting the next, and now chuckling over the ruin of a fellow-creature.

"Well, this *is* a catastrophe!" exclaimed one of the young ladies.

"She who only a few weeks ago was so much envied!" observed another Honourable Miss.

"And with whom any of us would have so cheerfully changed places!" cried a third.

"But it is just what we all expected," remarked Lady Brunel; "and indeed what Mrs Fitzherbert herself most richly deserves."

"Her pride has been detestable!" exclaimed the Dowager-Countess, tossing her head indignantly.

"And then her character—her example—positive contamination!" cried Lady Brunel. "I hope God will forgive me for having ever allowed my daughters to speak to such a creature."

"You may go, fellow!" observed the Dowager-Countess, flinging the intimation at poor Crimp with that sovereign insolence of which a member of England's arrogant aristocracy is alone capable.

And, more utterly crest-fallen than ever, the poor devil slunk out of the splendid mansion, as if he had been detected in the commission of a theft. He only breathed freely when, safely ensconced once more in the hackney-coach, he was borne out of sight of the patrician palace in which so flagrant a specimen of aristocratic heartlessness had been added to his experiences of human life.

And now, while Lady Singleton and Miss

Jukes were discussing a succulent lunch and pouring into each other's bosoms certain little confidences by no means corroborative of their good morals,—while, in the second place, the sanctified-looking Dowager-Marchioness of Banbury was toying with one of her handsome pages on the drawing-room sofa,—and while, in the third place, the old Countess of Montgomery and her lady companions were commenting, with a true enjoyment and a lively zest, upon the downfall of Mrs. Fitzherbert and laughing at the success with which they drew Mr. Crimp out and gleaned from him all those particulars that now furnished food for so much pleasant discussion,—while such, we say, were the proceedings in the several houses visited that day by the bailiff, this individual himself was returning, melancholy and dispirited, to the almost deserted dwelling of Mrs. Fitzherbert.

It was nearly three o'clock in the afternoon when he alighted from the hackney-coach at the termination of his fruitless mission. On ascending to the apartment where he had left Mrs. Fitzherbert in the custody of his man Jack, he found the unhappy lady pacing the room in a condition of the most nervous suspense, while his follower was seated near the fire, contemplating the blazing coals with an air of indifference to all beside.

The failure of Mr. Crimp's errand was instantaneously read by Mrs. Fitzherbert in his face; and, clasping her hands together, she fell upon her knees, exclaiming with frantic wildness, "Oh, do not take me to prison—I implore you not to drag me hence! Grant me a few days' license——"

"Calm yourself, ma'am," interrupted Mr. Nathan Crimp; "you ain't a-going to quod—o'ny to my lock-up house."

"But that is almost as bad as a prison!" she exclaimed, with a rending emphasis in her words and despair in her looks.

"Well, ma'am, I'll make yer as comfortable as I can: but there you must go—and at vunce too. None of your friends won't do nuffin for you——"

"Friends, indeed!" ejaculated Mrs. Fitzherbert, bitterly, as she rose from her suppliant posture. "The unfortunate have no friends; on the contrary, I dare believe that many and many a heart, lately so full of envious and jealous feelings, will now rejoice at my downfall! Ah! I see by your looks that such is already the case," she cried, reading in the expression of the bailiff's countenance the confirmation of her most galling fears. "But I will not now shrink from making one more trial of *love* and *friendship*," she added, with increasing bitterness of tone and excitement of manner; "and this last experiment shall be tested from the lock-up house, which is the threshold of the debtor's gaol!"

"Well, ma'am, what have you resolved upon?" inquired Mr. Crimp, who, as the reader may have seen, did not possess a bad heart, although the very nature of his calling had rendered selfishness the prominent feature in his character.

"I have resolved upon accompanying you forthwith," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, now speaking with the firmness of desperation, while her lips were as colourless as her cheeks: "I have also determined upon allowing forty-eight hours to elapse without making another effort to procure my liberation—so that the whole metropolis may learn what has happened, and thus have leisure to comment upon the generosity, manliness, and affection of him who permits all this to take place. "Yes—forty-eight hours shall elapse in that manner," she cried, with a virulent bitterness in her tone and a glare of frenzy in her eyes; "and then, if no notice be taken of me in a certain quarter—then, I say, I will send and demand as a right what I never would have accepted, much less besought, as a boon."

Having thus spoken, Mrs. Fitzherbert repaired to her own chamber; and while Crimp waited outside in the passage to assure himself that she did not give him the slip, the once courted and almost worshipped lady performed her unassisted toilette.

No tears now traced their pearly path adown her cheeks; her eyes seemed to burn with the light of frenzy, and her face was flushed with the hectic glow of fever. The pulsations of her heart were rapid and abrupt:—the heavings of her bosom proved this. There was something awful about her—as if she had reached that crisis of her destiny when suicide was an alternative as conspicuous to her view as the chance of redemption from her difficulties. In her brain was a sensation of hurry and confusion: she felt as never before she had felt, either in the head or in the heart!

At length her toilette was completed; and apparelled in the most unpretending garb, she issued forth from her chamber. In her purse there were a few shillings; in a little casket there were a few jewels. But all her most precious gems, as well as her plate and other valuables, were already in pledge:—and thus was it that, standing upon the very verge of pauperism—friendless and alone—unattended by even a domestic, and unaccompanied by even such sympathy as a hired abigail might have bestowed—the once brilliant and magnificent Mrs. Fitzherbert entered the hackney-coach and was driven off to the sponging-house in Chancery Lane.

CHAPTER CLXVII.

THE MONSTER-MAN.

AGAIN have we a scene of horror to depict: once more must we seek the churchyard by night, when the moon is shining pure and cold and the silver stars spangle the deep blue vault of heaven.

'Twas twelve o'clock—midnight,—that hour when even the revellers over the wine-cup look at each other to imply that the moment for breaking up the orgie is at hand,—when the daughter of crime begins to think it fruitless to pace the street any longer or later that night, and turns her weary steps towards the abode of pollution which she denominates her "home,"—when the desperate suicide seeks the bridge from which the fatal plunge may be made without the fear of molestation at such an hour,—when the convict in the doomed cell of Newgate counts the strok of St. Sepulchre's clock, and calculates with a heavy, Oh! so heavy a heart, that he has only eight hours more to live,—when the Cabinet Minister rises from the table in his private office where he has been concocting some fresh invasion upon the popular rights, and some new element of wealth, monopoly, or influence for the greedy, griping, heartless aristocracy,—when the gambler is just beginning to feel excited with the ruinous play which he proposes to continue until daybreak,—when the gorged alderman turns and moans upon a couch which, though of down, is made comfortless by indigestion, and when the poor starving wretch

tosses in his miserable garret whence famine repels even the advance of that number which costs nothing,—when the lean, pining, perishing needlewoman snuffs her solitary candle and sighs over the work which she dares not lay aside until she shall have pushed her heart-breaking toils farther and still deeper into the cold, cold night,—when the burglar steals abroad, with pistols and crape-mask, skeleton-keys and dark lantern, to do his dangerous, desperate work,—when music resounds through the saloons of rank, wealth, and fashion, and the roseate floods of luxury gush forth from the joints in gilded shutters and between the folds of velvet curtains,—when in attics, and cellars, and on the steps of street-doors, and in the entrances of courts, and under the dry arches of bridges and coal-wharfs, are gathered those wretched outcasts of society and those innumerable beings whom monopoly in all its detestable shapes excludes from the great community of labour,—and when, too, murder bares its red right hand and mingles its voice of terror with the dull moaning of the night-wind,—at this hour was it that the monster-man entered one of the churchyards in the north-western suburb of London.

He was clad in that rough sailor-garb which he wore when last we beheld him at his diabolical work;—and beneath his jacket he carried the implement that was so necessary to him in his nocturnal occupation.

On entering the churchyard he paused—he leant against the gate over which he had just clambered—and dropping the shovel from under his rough coat, he covered his countenance with his hands and groaned aloud in mortal agony.

"O God! what have I done that I should thus be made the sport of an infernal hallucination—the victim of a horrible nightmare? But is it true—Oh! is it true that like a jackal I tear open the graves of the dead, and like a vampyre I prey upon them? Yes—it is no dream—no delusion: 'tis a hideous, horrible, damnable reality—and even now—now—I feel the accursed influence creeping over me! Oh! it comes—it comes, slow and chilling at first, like the gradual coiling of a slimy snake around the limbs;—and now it seems to burn on the surface of my flesh and tingle in my veins, as the sensation gains upon me! Oh! spare me—spare me!" exclaimed the wretched man, throwing up his arms in despair: "spare me—spare me!" he cried, in a rending voice, as he stretched out his hands towards the moon that shone like a crescent of silver. "But what can I do?—how can I combat against my destiny? It is my fate which I am obeying: like Cain am I stricken—like Judas am I doomed—like the Wandering Jew am I cursed! And yet what evil have I done? Cain murdered his brother Abel: never, never have I shed a drop of human blood at all! Judas betrayed his Redeemer for thirty pieces of silver: but never did I wrong a friend! The Wandering Jew struck Christ when fainting beneath the weight of His cross as He bore it to Mount Calvary: but I never disavowed my Saviour—never forgot to pray to him night and morning! Wherefore, then, am I doomed?—wherefore am I fated?—wherefore am I cursed? Oh! it is not God who has fastened his ban upon me: it is the world that has made me an outcast! I am not the victim of heaven's wrath—but of society's injustice: I am not a sacrifice to the vengeance of Providence—but to the tyranny of Man! I asked for work—and the demand was vain: I sought to eat the bread of industry—but starvation made its gaunt home beneath my roof. I was torn away by ruthless tyrants from all whom I loved and held dear: and God only knows all that I have since endured—all that I have since become! The thought drives me mad—mad—mad! Wife, where art thou? In the cold, silent grave repose thy remains. Children, where are ye? Oh! that some kind spirit would waft the answer to mine ears: for I have sought ye everywhere, my poor children—my beloved babes—and I can find ye not! No wonder, then, that I am mad—furiously mad—insanely, rabidly, raving mad!"

And as the miserable wretch yelled forth these last words, he tore his hair—beat his breast violently—and dashed his open palms with all his might against his forehead as if he sought to break in the wall of his brain.

There were houses near enough for him to have been overheard; but perhaps the inmates slept soundly—or peradventure those whom the cries disturbed might have deemed them to emanate from the tipsy folly of some drunkard reeling home.

The bat swept over the head of the monster-man—the owl hooted from the belfry of the church—and the raven croaked from the adjacent tree. Then all was still—all was silent:—and the unhappy being leant against the gate—statue-like—motionless.

Suddenly the influence which he had already felt creeping over him,—that indomitable, irresistible influence which the monster-man regarded as his fate—his doom—the spell that urged him on to the accomplishment of a fearful destiny,—this mysterious and scarcely comprehensible influence it was which now seized upon him as if it were an enormous hand of iron that clutched him—made him spring with an abrupt start from his reverie of profoundly absorbing woe—and endowed him with all the horrible vitality which was to concentrate its energies to the accomplishment of an infernal task.

With a yell of despair—for the miserable being felt and comprehended all the power and all the tendency of that influence which he could not resist, revolting and loathsome though it were,—he picked up his spade—sprang on to the nearest tomb—and thence began to pass from monument to monument and stone to stone in the same way as on a former occasion.

Frequently he stopped and listened: sometimes he lay down upon the flat stone of tumular masonry—and then his attention would be breathless as his terror was appalling. The perspiration would break out all over him; bathed in the sweat of his anguish, his limbs would nevertheless quiver and tremble as if with an icy chilliness. His hair would stand on end—his eyes would glare with the light of frenzy through the silver flood which the moon sent forth to fill the atmosphere. But when the cause of alarm—or perhaps, in some instances, the fancied cause—had passed, how sudden would prove the relief experienced by the unhappy wretch! The breath would come freely again all in a moment—the limbs would recover their power—the blood would circulate naturally—and the perspiration would seem to evaporate

instantaneously. Then onward would he go—proceeding from tomb to tomb as before,—now pausing to examine the ground between—then straining his eyes to examine the appearance of some grave in the distance,—now giving vent to a sudden feeling of anguish in profound sobs—then remaining dumb, as if all his senses, all his faculties were for the time absorbed in that influence which shed its mysterious and appalling spells upon him.

Oh! surely, surely the doom of that monster-man was very terrible!—surely he was some accursed being fulfilling a destiny of no common order!

But let us follow him now, as he pursues his way from one tumular elevation to another.

The moon is shining in all her silver purity—the stars are keeping company with the vestal of the night. Into the strongest relief are thrown the salient features of the scene: into the darkest gloom are the shades flung. The striking contrast of the argentine brilliancy and the sombre depth is ever inseparable from a night thus splendidly moonlit;—and amidst the light, the silence, and the picturesque aspect of the whole scene, the dark form of that man moving from grave-stone to grave-stone has something ominous in its appearance.

But, Ah! how he pauses again: and this time 'tis not to listen—'tis not in terror. No—'tis because he distinguishes a new-made grave—and he looks well to the nature of the intervening objects to assure himself how he may approach it in security.

As on the former occasion, he moves cautiously from tomb to tomb until he is close up to the verge of the mound so recently raised. It stood within a foot of a low tumular structure, the sides of which were of brick-work supporting a large stone horizontally placed and whereon an inscription was placed. Lying flat with his face downwards upon this monument, the midnight desecrator of churchyards was enabled to grope with his hands all about the immediate vicinage of the newly-made grave,—and at length finding a wire, for which he was evidently searching, he fingered it so delicately as to prevent the slightest vibration, and then clipped it asunder with the pair of scissors which he invariably carried about his person.

This being done, he fearlessly descended from the neighbouring tomb—detached a large portion of the wire—threw the piece away—and then began to hollow out the grave to which an occupant had so recently been assigned.

It now appeared as if an infernal energy inspired him. Like Samson when pulling down the edifice upon his own head and the head of his persecutors, the monster-man seemed to acquire from some mysterious and superhuman source an amount of strength equivalent to the task which he had in hand.

The perspiration poured off him—his garments were almost saturated with the moisture. As the moonlight streamed upon his countenance, the veins upon his brow appeared like knotted cords beneath his skin. Straining at every nerve—sweating at every pore—the monster-man pursued his toil, shovelling up the earth with incredible speed, and all the while swayed by a terror lest he should be detected in the horrible work!

At length the coffin was reached—the spade struck upon the lid—and the sound was as hollow as if the dead inside had spoken in sepulchral tones—a little more earth to shovel out—and then the way was cleared for the raising of the coffin. This was speedily accomplished;—and when the long, narrow, sinister-shaped thing lay upon the mound of soil that had been thrown out, the monster-man forced off the lid with his spade. This was the work of a few moments; then the winding-sheet was torn away—and upon the marble countenance of an elderly man did the moonlight pour its silvery flood.

Yes—the corpse was that of a man long past the prime of life, and whose appearance must have been venerable during his latter years. He had not been dead many days—nor buried many hours: indeed, he looked as if he were but serenely sleeping—for as yet there was nothing loathsome in the aspect of the corpse.

For a few moments—nay, for upwards of a minute—did the monster-man gaze intently upon the face of the dead: and then a desperate struggle seemed suddenly to arise within his own breast—increasing all in an instant to a frightful pitch, as the sea when the squall sweeps over it is lashed up into surging billows quick as the eye can wink.

Was he battling with the wild hurricane of some passion claiming the mastery over him?—was he fighting against some ferocious craving which was rapidly acquiring strength and power? was he warring with some demoniac instinct from which all his better feelings revolted? Yes—it must have been so: for he writhed fearfully—he twisted his form about as if it were a huge piece of rope that was thus undulating—he seemed like a piece cut out of a monstrous snake, and in which the vitality still manifested itself by torturing convulsions. Then dreadful moans escaped him, mingled with suffocating sobs: then he dashed his hands violently against his brow—then he clenched his fingers in his hair.

But the infernal passion gained upon him—the hellish influence was rapidly asserting its complete mastery. One desperate struggle more—one last tremendous effort to fling off the serpent-coils that were closing in around him,—one final attempt to breathe a prayer,—and then——"

——Oh! then all that followed was hideous and horrible in the extreme: for suddenly seizing upon the spade which lay at his feet, the monster-man raised it savagely—brandished it ferociously—and then began to mutilate the corpse with a spite as diabolical and a malignity as infernal as if he were a fiend avenging his own fall upon the human race!

And now the wretch gnashed his teeth—and ground them together—and sucked his lips, which were parched with a burning thirst: then his tongue lolled out, and the foam gathered round his mouth, becoming bloody in a short time with the cracking of those lips so painfully parched. And the man's eyes glowered like those of a demon,—yes, glowered and glared like red-hot cinders set in those sockets where eyes were wont to be!

And still he continued to hack and hew the corpse: still he pursued the infernal pastime. His loathing and repugnance had all disappeared—or rather had changed into a delirious pleasure, and

a maddening delight at the hellish game which he was thus playing. Then, so soon as he was tired of mutilating the body with the spade, he threw the implement from him—he stooped down—and with his hands did he tear away the lacerated flesh from the bones of the corpse!

Oh! it was a damnable pastime—an infernal sport! And the wretch chuckled heartily and laughed madly the while.

At length he desisted from this wanton, meaningless, and incomprehensible mutilation of the dead; and, all his feelings suddenly undergoing a tremendous reaction, he became a prey to mortal terror—unnerved—dispirited—robbed of all his energies—with a sensation as if the tide of life itself were ebbing away. Then he sank down in a state of total unconsciousness by the side of the corpse which he had torn from its coffin and so cruelly mangled.

For nearly two hours did this utter prostration last,—two mortal hours during which the man remained in a deep trance, giving not the slightest sign of life. Infuriate monster as he had that night proved himself to be, a child might now have slain him, so helpless and so insensible was he!

But all on a sudden—as if a cannon had been fired close by his ear, or as if the rod of a most powerful galvanic battery had been applied to him—he started up. Consciousness returned not gradually—but with a marvellous abruptness: life flowed not back by gradient ripples into his heart, but poured in with a sudden volume that sent all the auxiliary rills coursing with lightning speed through the veins.

"O God! is it possible?—have I done it again?" he cried, or rather shrieked forth in his anguish, as his eyes, the moment they opened once more, encountered the mangled corpse—the violated coffin—the rent winding-sheet—the open grave—and all the ghastly features of the place which he had made the scene of his infernal revelry.

For a few instants he stood gazing upon the mutilated dead—appalled at the hideous evidences of his own demoniac conduct: then, seized with a sudden terror he turned to fly from the spot. But, forgetting how ticklish was the ground on which he trod, he utterly neglected his wonted precaution of walking upon the tombstones.

The result of this obliviousness on his part was speedily made manifest: for scarcely had he rushed away from the immediate vicinage of the open grave and the mangled corpse, when he trod upon the very wire a portion of which he had ere now cut so cautiously away.

There was an immediate explosion of the spring-gun with which that wire had connexion; —and a yell of agony burst from the lips of the monster-man as he received a dozen shot-wounds in various parts of his body.

An alarm was instaneously raised in the neighbouring houses: lights were speedily seen to gleam at the windows and move about in those dwellings—and men's voices were heard calling to each other, as neighbour demanded of neighbour whether he had caught the ominous sound of the spring-gun and would hasten in search of the midnight desecrator of graves.

In a few minutes a dozen persons were hastening from different directions to the churchyard; and amongst the tombs did they unhesitatingly plunge, there being no longer any danger from the spring-gun as its contents were discharged. Guided by the moon-light, they soon discovered the spot where the grave had been desecrated and the corpse mangled: but vainly did they search for the miscreant who had accomplished the diabolical work.

There were fresh marks of blood near the open grave: those marks were traced to a distance of several yards—and on reaching the pathway which intersected the cemetery they were suddenly lost altogether.

The individuals engaged in this research separated in all directions to hunt down the wretch who had so long been carrying on this diabolical game, but who now appeared likely to fall into the hands of justice at last. It was evident from the blood-stains that he had been severely wounded: and the inference was therefore natural that his arrest must speedily follow.

But after beating about all the vicinage of the churchyard for upwards of an hour—after scrutinizing every nook and corner which the seachers could possibly think of—they found all their endeavours fruitless and all their hopes baffled.

The monster-man had escaped—leaving the open grave, the mangled corpse, and the shovel which he had used as dreadful evidences of his presence in that quarter: while the discharged spring-gun and the useless search seemed to afford confirmation for many a gossip's tale respecting the horrors and mysteries of Vampyrism!

CHAPTER CLXVIII.

THE PRINCE AND THE SHERIFF'S OFFICER.

It was about three o'clock in the afternoon, on the second day after the arrest of Mrs. Fitzherbert; and his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales was seated alone in his private apartment, busily engaged in perusing a long letter which he had received from a friend whom he had sent over to Germany for the especial purpose of making a true and faithful report of the personal appearance and intellectual qualities of the Princess Caroline of Brunswick.

His Royal Highness was attired in his morning-gown, a pair of loose breeches, stockings without garters, and slippers; and he was half-reclining in an indolent manner in an arm-chair near the fire, reading with the profoundest interest the document which he had just received from his emissary to Germany.

"Oh! good teeth," he murmured to himself: "well, I am glad of that! If there be one feature more lovely than another, it is the teeth. A beautiful face is spoiled by indifferent teeth. Give me a plain woman with good teeth in preference to a charming creature with bad teeth. Ah! poor Octavia Clarendon—what rows of pearls had *she!* But Pauline too—yes, Miss Pauline has teeth equally fine. And I have lost sight of those girls entirely lately. Ever since that accursed masquerade affair—or rather the interruption at Mrs. Brace's house—I seem to have abandoned all idea of possessing Pauline. But, by Jove! it is only a *seeming* on my part: for now that some accident or another has recalled her image so vividly to my

mind, I feel a sudden resuscitation of those desires which her charming appearance as the Flower Girl engendered in my soul. Ah! when the lustre of that masquerade-scene lighted her form in all its splendour, how glorious was the symmetry of that shape—how stainless the arms and bosom—how full of elegance every attitude! On my soul, Pauline is lovelier and more desirable than her sister—at least now that I have possessed her sister and that I long to possess herself! I cannot fix my mental vision upon Pauline's charms without being intoxicated with the halo of beauty and the perfume of love which seem to float around her. But, oh! to hear that musical voice of her's escape in joyous murmurs of pleasure through lips red as coral and moist with voluptuousness, — to behold those blue eyes half closing in the ecstacy of passion's transport,—to feel her exquisite form vibrating with all the abandonment of a sensuous suppleness,—Oh! this were to be inundated with the bliss of paradise!"

Then, closing his eyes and throwing back his head, the royal voluptuary gave himself up altogether to the delicious flood of ideas which the powers of an imagination so licentiously fervid had conjured up;—and thus for a few minutes did he remain gloating on the picture which represented the innocent and beauteous Pauline succumbing to his desires and abandoning herself with a kindred ardour to his embraces.

But the circumstance of his emissary's document falling from his hand aroused him from that voluptuous dream; and, picking up the paper, he proceeded to scan and comment upon its contents.

"Well, my future wife possesses good teeth—and I have already said that I am glad of that 'She is twenty-five years old:' just the age that I like

when the lady herself is handsome. '*Her stature is middling: her bust good.*' I wish she was tall—tall and queen-like, as Georgiana,—or tall and graceful, as Pauline. Ah! Pauline—Pauline! how does thine image keep recurring to my thoughts! But let me see what more my correspondent tells me of my future wife? '*Her person is altogether pleasing.*' Why—that's entirely a matter of taste! For my part, I like women whose charms are matured and full, but without the least approach to coarseness. Let their beauties once verge upon coarseness, and I have done with them! '*Her accomplishments are numerous and exquisite.*' Bah! with what accomplishments can this German princess be endowed that shall even equal those of our English ladies? But because she *is* a princess, she must of course be paraded as a goddess of perfection. Well, so be it: 'tis a part of the humbug by which all royal personages profit! Kings and Queens, Princes and Princesses, Royal Dukes and Duchesses, must be represented as deities: or else King-worship would soon become extinct! And now what does my correspondent tell me next? That my future wife's '*appearance at Court is majestic.*' Pshaw! I won't believe it! Majestic, indeed—with a middling stature! No—no: if he had said '*elegant*' and '*graceful*,' well and good. There can be nothing *majestic* in her. A short woman only looks ridiculous when dressed up in the gaud and finery of a queen or princess. If once the phrase '*little Queen*,' or '*little Princess*' should come into vogue, and be applied to full-blown women instead of mere girls, the fact must be taken as a sign of the times—a proof, indeed, that Royalty is at a discount. But never mind!—as I have often said before, the monarchical system will last my time out—and damn all the consequences! Ah! what have we next in this letter? '*The manner of her Royal Highness the Princess Caroline, is characterised by sweetness, condescension, and affability.*' She will need all her sweetness of temper to put up with my intrigues and infidelities, I can tell her! '*Her eyes are blue, and full of intelligence.*' Yes—and Pauline's eyes are blue—and in their delicious depths young Cupid dwells! Blue—deep blue—and rolling with a softly sensuous languor: those are Pauline's eyes! And now what is the next detail in my correspondent's missive? '*The Princess's countenance is highly animated.*' Never was description more vague! Animated with what? There is the countenance of Eleanor of Desborough that breathes desire in every lineament: there is the countenance of Georgiana of Devonshire, that tells the tale of delicious wantonness in every feature. Then, too, there is the lovely Rose Foster, whose face reflects all the virginal purity of her soul;—and there is Pauline's countenance again, in which a woman's dignity mingles with the expression of the amorous temperament which that dignity itself more than half subdues. Well, now, all this is animation;—and I'll be bound that my future wife possesses no animation so charming as any one of those faces which are uppermost in my memory. Ah! and of the four beauties whom I have named, *one* only has yielded—one only blessed me with her love! The three others have all eluded my pursuit! Eleanor of Desborough abhors me: Rose Foster fears me; Pauline Clarendon despises me! And yet, if I had not been been a fool, in every instance should I have triumphed. A little more persecution—and Eleanor must have been defeated some how or another: a little more audacity with Rose, on one of the occasions when she was in my power—and her virginity would have been rifled;—a little more perseverance with regard to Pauline, instead of losing sight of her altogether since the night of the masquerade—and who knows but that success would have awaited me in that quarter likewise? By heavens! I will renew my endeavours after all three! Yes—the haughty but impassioned and glowing Eleanor of Desborough shall be mine! I told her that the love with which she had inspired me, was changed into hatred;—I told her *this* on the occasion when Mrs. Fitzherbert burst upon our interview and marred my aim:—but, oh! who could long cherish a feeling of hatred against that splendid creature, with her olive complexion, her glorious eyes so full of fire, and her superb form so pre-eminently characterised by dignity, grace, and love! Yes—and Rose Foster—the sweet, innocent, timid maiden—shall be mine likewise, even if I have to send to the extremities of the earth to find her out! Last—but not least—oh! no, not least—the divine Pauline shall bless my arms;—and then no oriental Sultan will have revelled in beauties more exquisite than these!"

Again did the Prince of Wales pause to gloat in imagination over the picture which he was thus conjuring up, and to feast his libidinous fancy upon the charms which he recalled in vivid detail to his memory.

"But once again," he murmured at length, starting at the same time from the voluptuous reverie in which he was steeping his senses,—"once again let me turn my attention to this document which I have received from Germany. Nevertheless, surely it must be a bad omen for my approaching marriage, when I can think *so little* upon her who is to become my wife, and *so much* upon others whom I wish to enjoy as mistresses! Of a verity, the whole portraiture of the Princess Caroline, even with the colouring which my emissary has given to it, fascinates me not mightily. There are a few good details—but many unsatisfactory ones. '*Exquisite accomplishments*' may mean nothing more than drawing-room frivolities and courtly inanities: '*sweetness of manner*' conveys the irresistible idea of silliness and want of dignity. But what says my correspondent of her dress? Oh! '*always evincing the most admirable taste.*' Vague and inconclusive! But her hair? '*Of a light auburn—profuse—and generally worn in a style of simple elegance.*' If any human being can tell whether this means in bands or ringlets—in bows or frizzed—then I'll consent to be stigmatized as the greatest fool in Christendom! Ah! I already experience a secret loathing—an unaccountable aversion—for this German Princess who has been selected as my future wife. The feeling amounts to a presentiment which I cannot resist—a spell which fixes itself insuperably upon me—a superstition which I cannot shake off. Oh! if I who have plucked the fairest flowers in beauty's garden and crowned myself with the brightest gems won from the galaxy of female fashion,—if I who have conquered so often and been baffled so seldom, and to whom the coldest chastity has suddenly become changed into the warmest passion and the sternest prudery into the most yielding

softness,—if such a man as I—the first gentleman in Europe as well as the most envied heir to a throne in the whole world,—if I, in a word, am to be sacrificed to a coarse, silly-minded, common-looking creature—by the living God! all Princess though she be, and doubly Princess though she will become through her alliance with me, I will treat her worse than the veriest scullion in my kitchen—I will punish her bitterly, bitterly, for that presumption which prompted her to breathe the fatal '*Yes*' when she was asked whether she would marry the Prince of Wales!"

During the latter portion of these musings, his Royal Highness rose from his seat and paced the room with an excitement which was also evidenced in the loud tone to which his voice rapidly swelled and the earnest gesticulations that he made. Nor could anything exceed the haughty arrogance and the superb complaisance with which he spoke of himself as *the first gentleman in Europe*.

Having brought his denunciatory tirade to a conclusion, he returned to his seat and continued the perusal of the letter which he still held in his hand. For a few moments he read on with comparative coolness: but suddenly he started and held the document more closely to his eyes as if there were a possibility of misconception relative to some particular passage.

But, no: he had read aright—and thus the latter portion of the correspondence ran:—

"Your Royal Highness honoured me with a mission of the most secret and sacred character; and I set forth with the determination to perform my duty to the utmost of my power. That resolution remains unaltered. My mission properly divided itself into two objects: the first was to report concerning the personal appearance, accomplishments, and manners of her Serene Highness the Princess Caroline of Brunswick;—and the second was to glean as much information as possible respecting her private character, pursuits, &c., and especially as to whether her conduct had in anywise or at any time afforded grounds for scandalous whispering. It is this latter, and by far the least agreeable portion, of my task that I now proceed to accomplish.

"I have not the slightest doubt that her Serene Highness the Princess Caroline possesses every virtue. Her chastity is unquestionable: her propriety of conduct is beyond all question. In fact, the most inveterate scandal-mongers and purveyors of tittle-tattle have never dared to whisper a syllable prejudicial to the reputation of her Highness. But whether it be, or be not, a crime in the eyes of your Royal Highness, that the Princess has loved—nay, *still loves*—another, is a point which I dare not venture to speculate upon. I am here to tell the truth,—charged by your Royal Highness with a mission of secrecy;—and it therefore remains for me only to report such particulars as I have succeeded in gleaning.

"Her Serene Highness the Princess has undoubtedly formed an attachment for the Baron Bergami. This nobleman belongs to a poor but ancient family; and nothing of all that this family once possessed, remains to the Baron, except the titled name. He is a mere youth—remarkably handsome—and recently filled the post of secretary to the diplomatic agent for the Court of Prussia. But the instant it was known that negotiations had been opened between the British Minister and the Court of Brunswick, relative to the marriage of her Serene Highness to your Royal Highness, the Baron of Bergami suddenly disappeared. It is supposed that he was immediately despatched to fill some other appointment elsewhere.

"The love of the Princess for this youth is full of the most touching romance. They never spoke to each other in their lives. It was in the ducal chapel that the handsome Bergami first attracted the notice of her Highness; and her modest beauty at the same time made a deep impression upon his heart. This happened about eighteen months ago; and ever since (until Bergami quitted the State a few weeks back) was he a constant attendant in the ducal chapel. It would seem that the sentiment of love enables even the most innocent and artless woman to dive quickly and accurately into the depths of that mind which she is interested in probing: nor less can love speak by the eyes—and the language which those eloquent orbs express is universally comprehended without variation of idiom. Thus was it, then, that in due time the Princess read the secret of Bergami's soul—while he made a similar discovery with regard to the royal lady herself. Then tender looks were exchanged; and once or twice her Serene Highness dropped a flower from the ducal pew, as if by accident—but which the youthful adorer failed not to pick up and place next to his heart. The proof of homage and devotion which he gave in return consisted of odes and lyrics, sent anonymously to the principal lady-in-waiting upon her Highness; and this said lady-in-waiting fancied that they were addressed by some love-sick swain to herself. In the fulness of her vanity, she invariably showed them to the Princess, who failed not to comprehend from whom they came and for whose special perusal they were intended. Couched in terms the most respectful and in verse the most fluent and harmonious, these lyrics breathed as fervid a soul of love as that which Petrarch poured forth in immortal sonnets to the charming and worshipped Laura.

"And to those innocent exchanges of love's testimonials was the correspondence of her Serene Highness and Bergami limited. They never spoke to each other, save by the eyes: they never were near enough to each other to exchange a whispered vow or the slightest touch of hands. But in her artlessness, the Princess confessed to two or three lady-friends this singularly romantic passion which she experienced and had inspired; and those ladies whispered the tale to *their* friends. It eventually reached the ears of her Highness's august parents; and although they attached but little importance, and indeed scarcely any credence, to the matter, it was nevertheless deemed only proper and prudent to obtain from the Prussian Court an order for the removal of Bergami to another State.

"Such are the facts of this singular love-passage in the life of her Serene Highness; and my informant assures me that her Highness cherishes with a species of religious fervour the image of the handsome youth in her bosom. That I can fully rely upon my informant as an authority in this matter, your Royal Highness may judge from the fact that the said informant is one of the lady-friends enjoying the confidence of the Princess; and that having become my mistress, she freely and cheerfully unbosoms all her secrets to my ear."

Such was the concluding passage in the important document which his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales had that day received from his emissary in Germany. There was nothing in the romantic tale which it contained, to furnish him with a pretext for breaking off the contemplated match with the Princess Caroline: in fact, the whole thing was so childish that its truth could scarcely be admitted by serious-minded persons, when it came to be considered that her Serene Highness was not a girl of fifteen or sixteen, but a woman of twenty-five. Moreover, the Prince of Wales said to himself, "If I don't marry this German creature, my blessed parents and their equally agreeable Minister will only be looking out for another of the same breed; and I may go further and fare worse."

Having thus philosophically made up his mind to let the matrimonial affair take its course, the Prince was on the point of throwing the letter

into the fire, when it suddenly flashed to his brain that it might prove useful hereafter in some way or another.

"Who knows what purpose it may serve?" he muttered to himself.

And as he proceeded to secure the document in his desk, the operation reminded him of how his most valuable and important papers had been abstracted by the Amazon, and how they were still retained in her possession until the conditions which she had imposed upon his Royal Highness were fulfilled.

"I will be revenged upon that woman, by heaven!" he exclaimed aloud, and he dashed his clenched fist upon the lid of the desk. "Once let me be out of her power, and we shall see who is the more powerful—the heir-apparent to the British throne, or Jack Rann's blowen converted into Lady Lade!"

Scarcely had the Prince made this reflection, when Germain entered the room with a letter, which he handed to his royal master. He then retreated to the vicinage of the door, where he stood to await the reply that was desired.

The heir-apparent instantaneously recognised the fluent writing of Mrs. Fitzherbert; and with a trembling hand he opened the missive, the contents of which ran as follow:—

"Circumstances of the most distressing and humiliating character could alone induce me to ask you for assistance. I do not appeal to you as a wife to a husband—although I *have* the right to do so: I do not appeal to you as a friend to a friend, because all kindly feeling on your part towards me is extinct;—and I do not appeal to you as a mistress to her lover, because I never looked upon myself in any less honourable light than that of your spouse. No: in none of those capacities do I appeal to you—although it was originally my intention to put both *love* and *friendship* to a last test. But I request you, on the score of past reminiscences and all that has ever taken place between us, to see the bearer of this letter and satisfy him in such a manner that I may be released forthwith from my present cruel embarrassment."

The note was without date or signature: but the beautiful handwriting would have been unmistakable, even if the tender pathos of the language had touched no responsive chord in the heart of the Prince of Wales. He knew, then, that the missive was from Mrs. Fitzherbert: but he was altogether ignorant of the calamities which had befallen her;—and it was as much through curiosity to be enlightened in this respect, as from any feeling of a more praiseworthy nature, that he bade Germain introduce to his presence the bearer of the letter.

The valet bowed and retired;—and in a few minutes Mr. Nathan Crimp was ushered into the royal voluptuary's private apartment.

But the sheriff's-officer's external appearance had undergone as signal a change as copious ablutions, clean linen, the Sunday apparel, and a fine display of jewellery could possibly accomplish with regard to it. In fact, Mr. Crimp had made himself as smart as possible; and although it would have been well if he had looked a trifle less greasy about the hair and face, and likewise if he had removed the black cornices from his nails or at all events worn gloves, there nevertheless certainly was a great improvement in the personal appearance of Mr. Nathan Crimp.

Germain retired as soon as he had introduced this individual; and the Prince, having scanned him with a hasty but searching glance, demanded in a somewhat imperious tone, "Where is Mrs. Fitzherbert?—and who the devil are you?"

"Please your Royal Highness," returned Mr. Crimp, with a low bow and a scrape of the left foot, "the lady's in lavendar, and I'm the you know what—savin' your Royal Highness's presence."

"Damn the presence!" cried the Prince, impatiently. "What do you mean me to understand, man? Is Mrs. Fitzherbert in a lock-up house?—and are you a bailiff?"

"Please your Royal Highness, the lady's safe in my lock-up, as you have just observed: but I ain't a hordinary bum-baily—I'm the officer his-self."

"Ah! now I comprehend," said the Prince, throwing himself back into the arm-chair whence he had risen: then, taking a tooth-pick, he crossed one leg over another in a leisurely manner, and seemed to reflect for nearly a minute. "Well, and how much is she locked up for?" he at length demanded, in a tone which now appeared to be expressive of very great indifference indeed.

"Two thousand and odd guineas, may it please your Royal Highness," answered Crimp.

"Zounds!" ejaculated the Prince, tossing the tooth-pick into the fire. "And what does she want me to do?"

"Pay it, I suppose," was Mr. Nathan Crimp's very natural though somewhat blunt explanation.

"May I be damned——I mean may I be hanged!" exclaimed his Royal Highness, correcting himself, "if I can do anything of the kind. Come now, Mr. What's-your-name——"

"Crimp—Nathan Crimp—at your Royal Highness's service," interjected the bailiff, with another low bow.

"Well, Mr. Crimp, then," continued the Prince, in a tone of half-superciliousness and half-command,—"I know that all gentlemen of your fraternity are not only rich as Crœsus, but likewise ever ready to advance your coin at good interest. You will therefore take my note of hand for the lady's debt—with the addition of a suitable bonus for yourself."

"Your Royal Highness's note of hand!" exclaimed Crimp, with a sort of dismay at the proposal. "Why, bless your dear heart! it isn't negotiable—I couldn't do nothink with it: and besides, I'm young in the business as a hofficer and haven't so much money to lend."

"What can be done, then?" asked the Prince, carelessly. "For my part, I cannot spare two thousand guineas just at this moment; and if my note of hand will not do, why then——"

"The lady must go to the Fleet—that's the long and short on it," added Mr. Crimp. "But I hope your Royal Highness will make a heffort—for I can assure you she's in a woful plight. All her servants has run away—her friends won't do nothink for her—she's got little or no money left—and since she was arrested, a execution for a small debt has been put into her house in Piccadilly, so that her wery wardrobe is now under restraint, as the sayin' is."

"Well, I am very sorry for it," said the Prince, in a tone of unfeeling abruptness. "But I can

do nothing more in the matter than I have suggested; and therefore it is useless for you to remain here any longer."

"But what answer am I to take back to the poor lady?" demanded the sheriff's-officer.

"Go and tell her that I am so poor I cannot possibly assist her, and so indisposed that I cannot pay her a visit," replied the Prince;—and he waved his hand towards the door in a fashion too significant not to be comprehended by Mr. Crimp. "But stay!" suddenly ejaculated his Royal Highness, starting from his seat: "you had better depart by a private staircase which there is at hand—or else my people in the hall will only be stopping you to ask impertinent questions: for I daresay that some of them would not fail to guess what your calling is. Come, my good fellow—be off—and here's a guinea for you."

Thus speaking, the heir-apparent drew aside a velvet curtain at the extremity of the apartment—unlocked the door which was now revealed—and motioned impatiently for Mr. Crimp to take himself off by the secret staircase. The bailiff, whose right hand clutched the guinea which had been thrust into it, descended half-a-dozen steps at a time in his haste to comply with the royal pleasure, which evidently was that he should lose not a moment in vanishing from the perfumed precincts of Carlton House; and with such precipitation did he bundle himself down the staircase, that he had not time to check his pace when the sounds of ascending footsteps suddenly reached his ears. The consequence was that at the next moment he came in violent collision with the individual who was thus beginning to mount the staircase;—and before the unfortunate bailiff had time to murmur a single syllable of apology, he received a couple of smart lashes from a riding-whip.

"Stupid animal!" cried a voice that was certainly too melodious and flute-like for that of a man—and yet it came from the lips of one wearing a masculine apparel. "Could you not see whither you were going?"

The staircase was only dimly lighted by means of a small fan-window over the private door at the bottom: but Mr. Crimp was nevertheless enabled, by a second glance at the personage whom he had thus encountered, to perceive that it was a splendid woman in the attire of a man;—for the magnificent black hair showered in a thousand ringlets over the broad but sloping shoulders, and the tight-fitting frock-coat developed the luxuriant contours of the superb bust.

"Beg pardon, sir—ma'am—but your whip cuts sharp," said Mr. Nathan Crimp. "I didn't mean no offence by running agin you——"

"Well, then, my good fellow, we will say no more upon the subject," exclaimed the disguised lady, her merry smile revealing the brilliant teeth which appeared like the whitest and purest ivory set between the reddest and moistest coral. "But what on earth are you doing here?—and who are you? For if you will pardon my rudeness," added the Amazon, still laughing, "you seem to me more like a bailiff or writ-server than a Prince's lacquey."

"Well, ma'am—sir, I mean—that is to say, ma'am," stammered Crimp, utterly bewildered as to the proper terms in which he ought to address the superb creature whose feminine charms were too grandly imposing to be concealed by the masculine apparel which nevertheless became her admirably;—"you ain't wery far wrong in your conjecture——"

"What! then, you *are* an officer?" said Lady Lade, for she indeed it was: and, inspired by one of those sudden and incomprehensible sentiments of curiosity which often prompt even the most indifferent to inquire into the affairs of others, she raised her finger to her bright red lip, whispering in an under-tone, "Hush! speak low—or we may be overheard! And now tell me, my good fellow what has brought you hither?" she demanded, at the same time slipping a couple of guineas into the bailiff's hand.

"Just tell me, please, how I'm to address you—sir,—or ma'am?" asked Mr. Crimp, who felt remarkably anxious to be enlightened on that head.

"I am Lady Lade," was the response delivered with a good humoured smile; "and now you know to which sex I really do belong."

"Ah! ma'am, there wasn't no difficulty in telling that much, when once I'd leisure to take one good look at your ladyship," said Mr. Crimp, his mouth watering as he fixed his eyes eagerly upon the superb bosom which seemed ready to burst through the coat that imprisoned it. "But in the fust place I certainly did think you was a genelman—for that whip of your'n hit precious hard——"

"And I have given you the salve for the wound, my man," said the huntress, with a smile, as she glanced down at the gold which Mr. Nathan Crimp still held in his hand.

"Just so," he observed, now consigning the coin to his pocket: "and I wouldn't mind receiving as many lashes as your ladyship likes, at the same price. But you was a-asking me what I'm doing here;—and I don't care if I tell your ladyship the truth. Perhaps your ladyship knows Mrs. Fitzherbert?"

"By name and by sight, as a matter of course," responded the Amazon: "but not to speak to. What of her?"

"She's in a little trouble—or rather a great deal of trouble," continued Mr. Nathan Crimp; "and she sent me with a letter to ask the Prince to assist her. But he says he's too poor to advance any money, and too ill to go and see her."

"Where is she, then?" inquired Lady Letitia.

"At my lock-up in Chancery Lane," was the answer. "But she must go to the Fleet to-morrow unless she pays to-day, as Rigden the lawyer will rule the Sheriff to make a return."

"I know nothing of all those forms and ceremonies," said the Amazon: "but this I do know—that it is scandalous beyond all conception and infamous beyond all description for the Prince to treat the unfortunate lady in such a manner. How much does she owe?"

"Somethink more than a couple of thousand guineas would put her all to rights, may it please your ladyship," replied Crimp. "But I'm sure if such a nice, humane, good-hearted creatur' as your ladyship evidently is, would on'y come and call upon poor Mrs. Fitzherbert, she would feel herself so much obleeged——"

"Yes—I will accompany you to Chancery Lane at once," exclaimed the Amazon, after a few moments' profound meditation. "The business that

has brought me hither upon the present occasion is not so very urgent for a few hours," she added, in a musing tone to herself: "besides, it is probable that if I take Mrs. Fitzherbert's affair in hand for her, I shall have to speak to the Prince on *that* also. I may therefore as well kill two birds with one stone."

Thus musing, the beautiful huntress turned and led the way from the secret staircase, Mr. Nathan Crimp closely following her. Emerging from the private door, they hastened into Pall Mall, where they entered a hackney-coach, which bore them to the dark and musty-looking precincts of Chancery Lane.

CHAPTER CLXIX.

THE SPONGING-HOUSE.

It was five o'clock in the evening; and as a thick fog was coming rapidly over the City, the candles were already lighted in the apartment occupied by Mrs. Fitzherbert in Mr. Nathan Crimp's lock-up house.

This apartment was shabbily furnished and had a grimy appearance. Wherever the captive lady might happen to lay her hand—whether on the table, the side-board, the mantel, or the window-ledge—a dingy shade would be taken up, as it were, upon the snowy fingers. A good fire blazed in the grate—and yet the room wore a general air of discomfort that struck upon the mind like a sensation, and pierced with a chilling effect to the very marrow of the bones. Having been accustomed to sleep upon down—tread upon velvet—eat off massive gold plate—and revel in all the luxuries and elegances of life, Mrs. Fitzherbert experienced her present position in all the keenest sense of its bitterness.

Dull and dusty curtains were drawn over the windows—those windows which were protected with bars strong enough to resist the rapid impetuosity wherewith a lion might bound against them. Useless precaution so far as the present inmate of that room was concerned! *Her* delicate fingers would have shrunk from even touching the rusty surface of the bars! Besides, the apartment was on the first storey—fifteen feet above the level of the street on which it looked—and therefore affording in its own elevated position a pretty tolerable guarantee against a daring leap, even if there were no iron bars to protect the windows at all!

The furniture in the room was old and worm-eaten: the walls were stained with grease—and the ceiling was blackened with smoke.

On the side facing the windows, a door communicated with a sleeping-apartment: and in this chamber there were two beds—the accommodation being intended for a lady and her maid. But in the present instance the occupant of the best suite of rooms in Mr. Nathan Crimp's sponging-house, possessed no dependant of any description either to wait upon or to solace her.

And this lady—the once elegant, brilliant, and courted Mrs. Fitzherbert—was now seated in the comfortless parlour of the lock-up house, plunged in the most sorrowful reflections. But every time she heard a footstep upon the stairs, she started—stretched forth her head—and listened. Two hours had now elapsed since Nathan Crimp had set forth on her errand to Carlton House; and surely her fate must be already decided in one way or another? Was she to be released that evening?—or was she to repair to the Fleet prison next day? These were the alternatives; and, for aught that the unhappy lady could see or anticipate to the contrary, the result now depended entirely on the man who was her husband in the sight of heaven!

It was a little past five o'clock when she was aroused for the twentieth time from her reverie by the sounds of footsteps on the staircase;—and on the present occasion those sounds did not pass by the door communicating with the landing. No—they stopped at the threshold of her apartment—the door was thrown open—and Mr. Nathan Crimp announced in a loud voice, "Lady Letitia Lade!"

As when a sunbeam penetrating amidst an arbour of roses, suddenly flings a ruddy glow upon the marble basin of a fountain,—so did a flush instantaneously appear upon the pale complexion of the captive lady. For the name just announced, was indeed full well known to Mrs. Fitzherbert: the antecedents of Lady Lade—her wretched origin in Lukner's Lane, St. Giles—her connexion with "Sixteen-String Jack"—her marriage with the old baronet—her dissolute life—and the rumour that she had even been very intimate with the Prince himself,—all these matters were perfectly familiar to the fallen lady of quality.

The Amazon instantaneously perceived the glow of mingled indignation and surprise which spread over Mrs. Fitzherbert's countenance. Nor was she unprepared for some such exhibition of feeling: but taking off her hat, she said in her kindest tones, "I come, madam, to sympathise with you—and perhaps to extricate you from your embarrassments."

"And you ought to be very grateful, ma'am, to her ladyship for thus stepping for'ard," exclaimed Crimp, "at a moment when all your friends is keeping back'ard. But I'll leave you together for a time, ladies; and you can chat over the whole business."

Having thus spoken, Mr. Crimp closed the door and hurried down stairs, leaving the elegant Mrs. Fitzherbert and the hilarious Amazon alone together.

And strange was the contrast presented by those two women!—strange also in how many points they resembled each other! Mrs. Fitzherbert's radiant head was adorned with a natural crown of golden flaxiness which shone like concrete and circling sunbeams: the Amazon's hair was black as night, and yet shining with so rich a gloss that it seemed as if a glory encircled her head. The eyes of the captive lady were blue—those of the huntress black: but in the depths of each might be read the tale of strong passions, a warm temperament, and a yielding to temptation whenever the pleasure was really coveted and desired. The bust of Mrs. Fitzherbert was grandly beautiful—that of Lady Lade superbly luxuriant: the figure of each was admirably symmetrical and rounded in the richest contours—so that each splendid form seemed glowing to be pressed in the arms of a lover. But the huntress was taller than Mrs. Fitzherbert; and yet the more majestic dignity of the latter prevented this discrepancy from being noticed.

As to the disposition and real character of these

two ladies, the resemblance was much nearer than the Amazon suspected, or them Mrs. Fitzherbert herself would have been over-well pleased to acknowledge. For both were accustomed to obey the dictates of their passions without much regard to morality or virtue: both had overstepped the bounds of modesty at a very early age;—both, in fact, had paid their adoration to the Goddess of Pleasure. The difference, then, between them lay only in the circumstance that Mrs. Fitzherbert had veiled her intrigues as closely as possible and had even sustained a reputation for purity of conduct, save and except so far as her connexion with the Prince was concerned: whereas the Amazon had never troubled herself about the concealment of any one amour in which she engaged—and, although she did not actually make a boast of her dissolute morals, she only smiled or perhaps laughed outright when taxed with her numerous frailties.

Now when the huntress gazed upon Mrs. Fitzherbert, she said within herself, "You blush to receive a visit from me; and yet I am well acquainted with the fact that you were once the mistress of the Marquis de Bellois." But it never struck Lady Lade at the moment that the handsome French nobleman might not have been the only lover whom the stately and prudish Mrs. Fitzherbert had received to her arms—that, indeed, she had rendered many and many an aspirant for her favours superlatively happy—and that perhaps her connexions in this manner had not been so very much less numerous nor less miscellaneous than those of Letitia herself! Only, as we have before said, the one had the grand art of covering her errors with an impenetrable veil—whereas the other had pursued her wanton career as freely and as fearlessly as she was wont to dash along a high road on the back of some spirited charger.

Such were the two ladies that now found themselves alone together. Mrs. Fitzherbert caught eagerly at the hope held out in the few prefatory words which Letitia had hastened to address to her: namely, "I come, madam, to sympathise with you—and perhaps to extricate you from your embarrassments." The aristocratic lady accordingly smothered in an instant the feeling of annoyance which had at first betrayed itself in the flush that crimsoned her countenance;—and requesting the Amazon to be seated, she said, "I presume that the bailiff has left you to explain to me the result of his mission to Carlton House?"

"Such is the fact, madam," replied Lady Letitia. "And to tell you the truth——"

"Ah! I see that you hesitate—you have disagreeable intelligence to impart!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert. "The Prince would not see my messenger—or he returned a cold reply—or——Oh! keep me not in suspense, I implore you!"

"Were the result of the man's errand at all satisfactory, I should be overwhelmed with haste to communicate it," said the Amazon: "or he himself would have been too eager to do so—and in that case my presence here would have been rendered unnecessary. But inasmuch as you have no hope in that quarter where you had a right to expect everything——"

"Oh! is it possible that *he* could treat me thus heartlessly?" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, clasping her hands in anguish: then, almost immediately subduing her emotions and assuming an air of dignity, she said, "But I will not permit the conduct of such a man to break my spirit altogether. You see that I am calm and collected now: tell me, Lady Lade, how he acted towards the good-hearted and well-meaning individual whom I despatched to him."

"His Royal Highness, madam," responded the huntress, in a measured and emphatic tone, "declares that he is too poor to assist you and too indisposed to come and see you."

"He said *that*—did he?" murmured Mrs. Fitzherbert, endeavouring to retain her composure, but in reality experiencing a cold shiver throughout her frame. "And how happened it, madam, that I have been fortunate enough to deserve your sympathy?—and in what manner may I reckon upon your aid?"

"The step which I have taken was adopted on the spur of the moment," answered the huntress. "You have no doubt heard of me before: and perhaps all that you *have* thus heard is that I am a harum-scarum, good-for-nothing, wild, eccentric, and gay woman? Well, these attributes are perhaps correct enough: but I may observe, without the imputation of vanity, that I possess *a heart*. Now, the fact is, I some time ago became instrumental in procuring for his Royal Highness a loan from a French refugee, called the Marquis de St. Croix. This nobleman now requires the repayment of his money. He has applied to the Prince, who takes not the least notice of his letters. The result is that the Marquis comes to me and demands my intervention; and I promise that I will obtain the reimbursement of funds lent upon my representation and through my agency. Accordingly, I proceed this afternoon to Carlton House—I accidentally run against an individual in a manner which throws us into conversation together—this individual proves to be Mr. Nathan Crimp—and from his lips I glean the story of your misfortunes and the failure of his mission to the Prince. Then *this heart* of mine moves within me: I feel indignant at the outrage put upon one of my sex—I long to sympathise with you—and although I had heard that you were proud, haughty, and overbearing, I thought of you only as an oppressed, persecuted, and neglected woman—and therefore I came hither!"

"Believe me, I thank you—thank you most sincerely," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, profoundly touched by the ingenuous and open-hearted manner of the huntress.

"And I will tell you another reason wherefore I was instantaneously impelled by the thought of succouring you to the utmost of my power," continued the Amazon;—"and that is because you have been made to suffer much by one who unfortunately served the Prince *too* faithfully——"

"Ah! I begin to comprehend you!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, now suddenly recollecting that rumour had described the Amazon to be the mistress of Tim Meagles. "But is it possible that you are acquainted——"

"With *all*—with *everything!*" responded Lady Lade, in a low but significant tone. "I am aware that you are the Prince's wedded wife—aware also of the means that were adopted to drive you from Carlton House—aware of the existence of those letters which contain the secret that was held in terror over you——"

"Then you are acquainted with enough to make me blush in your presence," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, now acting in perfect accordance with the affected prudery which had become habitual to her: and covering her face with her hands, she appeared to be overwhelmed with shame and confusion.

"Do not annoy yourself, madam," observed the auntress. "I am not quite an angel of purity myself—and perhaps a little farther removed from such an immaculate state of being than you are. Indeed, that same Mr. Meagles to whom I just now alluded as one who had served his Royal Highness too faithfully, had for some time been on intimate terms with me; until the base ingratitude and treachery of the Prince—pardon me for speaking in these harsh terms of his Royal Highness—caused the expatriation of Meagles——"

"And the papers—what became of the papers?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert hastily, and speaking in a tone hoarse and breathless with suspense.

"They fell into the hands of the Prince," replied the Amazon.

"O God! then *he* knows all!" exclaimed the unhappy lady, once again clasping her hands in the anguish of despair.

"Think you, madam," returned the Amazon, "that his Royal Highness would leave you in your present embarrassment, if it were not to avenge himself upon you for that one important passage in your life which those letters reveal? But what will you say when I inform you that these papers are at the present moment in my possession?"

"Oh! you will give them up to me—you will permit me to destroy those evidences of an amour which has proved so fatal to me?" cried Mrs. Fitzherbert. "Tell me, dear friend—tell me that you will give me those letters——"

"I dare not, lady—I dare not," interrupted Letitia. "But I may perhaps make use of *other* documents which are likewise in my possession, to terrify the Prince, and wring from him the amount of money you require. On this subject we will discourse presently: but first of all, I must explain to you that inasmuch as Meagles did you a great and serious injury, and as he has since experienced the ingratitude with which the Prince pays those who serve him too faithfully, I know that the mind of my ill-used friend must have undergone such a change as would lead him to make all possible atonement towards those whom he has been the instrument of oppressing and wronging on the behalf of his Royal Highness. Therefore, with this conviction, am I now acting as Meagles himself would act were he in London at the present moment."

"Again, my dear Letitia," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, assuming her most coaxing tone and wheedling manner,—"again do I thank you for all the generous sympathy you are displaying towards me. But, Oh! you would bind me everlastingly towards you if you were to give me up, or destroy in my presence, those fatal letters——"

"My dear madam, I dare not!" was the emphatic reply given by the huntress. "Mr. Meagles will be in England shortly, and then those papers must either be returned to the Prince himself, or placed by me at Meagles' disposal. Which course I shall pursue, will depend upon circumstances. But there is one grand and important use to which I can turn certain *other* papers, if you will——"

"And these other papers?" ejaculated Mrs. Fitzherbert inquiringly.

"The proofs of your marriage with the Prince!" was the low, solemn, and whispered response.

"Ah! these also are in your possession?" exclaimed the lady, surveying Letitia with as much suspicion and alarm as profound amazement.

"Yes, madam," was the calm response. "I hold in my possession such documents as would shake the very monarchy to its foundation!"

"And how—my God!—how can you serve *me!*" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, trembling all over with the nervous excitement of mingled hope, fear, and cruel suspense.

"Listen, madam," resumed the huntress, speaking in a low but impressive tone. "If you say but the word I will proceed to Windsor and seek an interview with the King. It would not be the first time that I have encountered his Majesty with threats in order to wring from him certain concessions," observed the beauteous Amazon, with a smile. "On the former occasion it was to procure favours for the Prince—this time it shall be to demand justice for you. Leave the matter in my hands—and if I do not succeed in obtaining for you the title of a Duchess with an income of twenty thousand a-year——"

"Letitia, you are raving!—my dear friend, you are raving!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, wildly excited with new hopes and aspirations. "The King will spurn you from him——"

"The King will grant me all that I require," rejoined the Amazon, with the decisive emphasis and look of one which is confident of success in a proposed undertaking.

"But my union with the Prince exists in contravention of the Royal Marriage Act," said Mrs. Fitzherbert; "and the King will defy our threats."

"Not so, madam," returned the huntress: "for I have already well weighed the various details and chances of the whole proceeding. The Prince, in espousing you, espoused a Catholic; and therefore he violated the Act of Settlement and forfeits his right, claim, and title to the British crown. Whether the marriage be good or bad according to the Royal Marriage Act, matters not to our purpose: it is a marriage in defiance of the Act of Settlement—and this is the point we have to rest our proceedings upon. Think you, then, that the King will abandon the cause of his eldest son—or that his Majesty will assist him out of this dilemma?"

"It is heaven that has sent you to me, my beloved friend!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, now throwing her arms about the Amazon's neck and embracing her with as much affection as if they were sisters. "A few weeks—nay, a few days ago, I would not have stirred a step in such a proceeding as the one you have outlined to me—nor would I have permitted a soul to take up my cause in such a manner. But now that I am so completely crushed and overwhelmed by calamities—now that adversities have fallen upon me thickly as hail—and now, too, that his Royal Highness proclaims his utter indifference, if not his open hostility and defiance, I feel that a change has come over me, and that I shall not be wise in suffering myself to be yielded up to martyrdom in order to spare the feelings of others. No—I will adopt the cours

which you have chalked out, my dear friend; and my eternal gratitude shall be your due!"

"To-morrow morning, then," said the Amazon, "I will repair to Windsor Castle and obtain an interview with the King."

"But you will not leave me immediately?" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, taking the hands of the huntress who had risen to depart. "Consider how lonely—how dull—how wretched I must be in this horrible place all by myself," continued the patrician lady, the tears running down her cheeks.

"I will remain with you a few hours—nay, more until to-morrow morning, if you will," said Letitia; "and we shall thus have ample leisure to discuss and mature the whole plan of proceeding."

"Oh you will stay with me until the morning!" cried Mrs. Fitzherbert, embracing the huntress in the enthusiasm of the most unfeigned delight. "This is indeed kind—most kind on your part! For to pass the night alone in such a place, is to stand on the verge of suicide every instant!"

"But we will not give way to horrible thoughts, my dear madam," said Lady Letitia. "On the contrary, we will send out for some wine—then perhaps you will permit me to smoke my cigarette—and we will chat, laugh, and enjoy ourselves so well that we shall altogether forget we are within the bars of a sponging-house."

"Be it so!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, her countenance brightening up more and more: then, as she drew her chair close to the fire and rang the bell for the servant to procure the wine, she observed, "And when I am a Duchess with an income of twenty thousand a-year, my best and dearest friend shall continue to be Letitia Lade."

CHAPTER CLXX.

A NIGHT IN THE SPONGING-HOUSE.

It was about half-past nine o'clock in the evening; and while Mrs. Fitzherbert and the Amazon were discussing their plans up-stairs, Mr. Nathan Crimp and his man Jack were discussing their pipes in the front office on the ground-floor.

The fog had cleared away—or rather had turned into a misty rain; and the evening was altogether as unpleasant as it well could be. The bailiff and his man were accordingly adding the creature-comfort of a quart-pot of egg-flip to the soothing influence of tobacco; and they had just quaffed each the first draught of the agreeable beverage, when a noise out in the street attracted their notice.

"By Jove! I will have just one kiss!" exclaimed a voice.

"And so will I!" cried another. "But how infernally modest she is!"

"And yet she showed her ankles pretty well as she walked!" said a third.

"Leave me alone—leave me alone!" cried the object of these remarks: and then there was a scuffle close outside the door of the sponging-house.

"Come along, Jack," exclaimed Mr. Nathan Crimp. "It's some of them blackguard law-students a-kissing a modest gal, I'll be bound."

"Well, let 'em do it," growled the man, who did not see the utility of abandoning his pipe and the egg-flip on any such chivalrous expedition as the one in which his master appeared anxious to engage him. "The law-students don't hurt you."

"No—but they sha'n't molest every modest gal as passes this way," exclaimed Nathan. "It ain't proper for me to permit it, being a householder and rate-payer and what not. So come along, Jack—and I'll stand a second pot of that stuff."

"Ah! that's another thing altogether," observed Jack: and, springing from his seat with extraordinary alacity he followed his master out into the street, where four or five young fellows, who in the present day would be signalized as "gents," were laying hold of a young person of apparently lady-like and modest demeanour, and who was vainly struggling to extricate herself from their grasp.

"Now, then, can't ye leave the young o'oman alone?" cried Mr. Nathan Crimp, leaping from the top of his door-steps down upon the nearest of the disturbers of the public peace: then, dealing a blow to his right and another to his left, and being ably seconded by his man Jack, the valorous bailiff not only rescued the young lady in the twinkling of an eye, but left all her assailants sprawling in the mud.

To conduct the said young lady into the office and bang the door in the faces of the half-drunken sparks who, springing to their legs again, rushed up the steps after the object of their fancy,—all this was the work of a moment;—and the bailiff's man very considerately handed the young lady the pewter pot of egg-flip. To Jack's great delight, but somewhat to the surprise of Mr. Crimp, the young lady took a sip of the beverage: then, having returned the vessel to the understrapper, she expressed her thanks for the service so opportunely rendered her. While thus speaking, she drew forth a guinea from her reticule; and placing it in Mr. Crimp's hand, she added, "You will perhaps send for a hackney-coach to convey me home; and in the meantime I shall feel obliged if you will permit me to warm myself by the fire for a few minutes—for the chill of the evening has penetrated to the very marrow of my bones."

As the young lady thus spoke, Mr. Crimp and his man surveyed her with some attention; and they could not help thinking that the law-students had at all events displayed a due appreciation of the beautiful in seeking to refresh themselves with kisses culled from her lips. For beautiful the young lady really was. Her hair, of a rich chesnut, was curled into ringlets; and an elegant gipsy hat set off a very pleasing countenance, with dark eyes, a handsome nose, and pearly teeth. She was above the middle height—her form was slender—her shape symmetrical—and her deportment characterised by dignified elegance. The dress that she wore was beautiful in all respects, and of handsome materials; and in fine, her whole appearance was that of a well-bred young lady.

That she should be alone in the streets at that hour, and that she should drink egg-flip, certainly astonished Mr. Nathan Crimp to a slight degree: but when he fingered the gold which she placed in his palm, all his thoughts turned in a moment so completely in her favour, that he was ready to believe her to be a duchess or a princess if she proclaimed herself as such.

"Fire to warm yourself, Miss —— or ma'am?" he exclaimed. "By jingo! there ain't a fire a-light in the whole place except down in the kitchen and up in the fust floor where them ladies is," he added, turning towards his man Jack.

"Well, why can't the young lady go up for a few minutes where them ladies is?" demanded the follower. "I dessay they won't objeck to such genteel company. As for poor Mrs. Fitzherbert——"

"Hush, Jack!" exclaimed Mr. Crimp. "What's the use——"

"Did you say Mrs. Fitzherbert?" demanded the young lady, turning abruptly towards the man: then, without even waiting for a reply, she exclaimed, "Good heavens! is it possible that the unfortunate lady has come to this? I had heard that everything was at an end between her and a certain illustrious personage—and I had likewise heard that she was in much pecuniary difficulty: but I could not have conceived that she would have been compelled to exchange her handsome abode in Piccadilly for a comparatively poor lodging in Chancery Lane."

"You see the young lady don't twig the place," observed Jack, half aside to his master. "This is a lock-up, Miss—a sponging-house——"

"Mrs. Fitzherbert in a lock-up," cried the young lady, overwhelmed with astonishment.

"I'm blowed if our new friend don't know summut about it, though," whispered Crimp to his follower. "See how glib the words 'lock-up' fell from her tongue."

"Well, I should like to be introduced into the same room where Mrs. Fitzherbert is now," resumed the young lady. "I would do all I could to console her——"

"She's got Lady Letitia Lade with her," observed Crimp; "and I dare say they won't objeck to see you for a short time, Miss—'specially when

you tells 'em how you've been delivered from rape and ravishment and what not, by me and my man here. So please to walk up to the fust floor, Miss, while I send for the hackney-coach——"

"Don't be in a hurry for the hackney-coach just for a minute or two," said the young lady, slipping another gold piece into the hand of Mr. Nathan Crimp. "The truth is, I should like to pass half-an-hour or so in the company of Mrs. Fitzherbert and Lady Lade. I have heard a great deal about both of them."

"Egad! you may pass the night with 'em, Miss, for any think I care," exclaimed Mr. Crimp. "At all events I won't send for the hackney-coach until you rings the bell up-stairs. And now if you'll foller me, Miss—there, that's right—mind your head agin the top of the staircase—it's raythor low and precious dark—but here we are safe and sound on the landin'. What name shall I say, if you please, Miss?" asked the bailiff, in a low whisper, as he paused at the head of the stairs.

"What name?" repeated the young lady. "Oh! Miss Plantagenet," she added instantaneously.

"Miss Plantagenet!" accordingly exclaimed Mr. Nathan Crimp, as he threw the door wide open: then, stepping into the room and bowing first to Mrs. Fitzherbert and immediately afterwards to the Amazon, he said, "Beg pardon, ladies—but I've taken the liberty to introduce a companion to you—and I know you'll be civil to her and all that kind of thing, 'cos she seems to be a very nice young creetur' and was used scandalous in the street just now by some rollicking sparks as was determined to kiss her. But me and my man—Ah! a handy feller is that there Jack when he chooses—made light work on it when we tumbled down upon the snobs and rescued the young lady in a jiffey. So, as she's raythor cold—and as it wouldn't be safe for her to think of leaving while them rascals is a-loiterin' about in front of the door, I've took the liberty of introducing her to you, ladies——"

"There never was such a long story that might have been summed up in so few words," interrupted the Amazon, but with a good-natured smile. "Miss Plantagenet seeks a warm fire and female companionship—and she can have both here. At least, unless the real owner of the apartment has any objection?" added the huntress, looking inquiringly at Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"Not the slightest, my dear friend," was the immediate response. "How could I, under the circumstances? Pray be seated near the fire, Miss Plantagenet," said the patrician lady, doing the honours of the comfortless room in the lock-up with all that elegance and grace which, having been acquired in the gilded saloons of fashion, were now so habitual to her.

"Ah! I knowed it would be all right," muttered Crimp, as he closed the door and withdrew.

Meantime Miss Plantagenet had advanced into the room and acknowledged with a graceful salutation the courteous remarks which had fallen from the lips of Letitia Lade and Mrs. Fitzherbert. The reader may be well-assured that these two ladies scanned, or rather scrutinised, at a glance the external appearance of their new friend; and the result was highly satisfactory. Indeed, they were both immediately prepossessed in her favour; and as she was the heroine of the little adventure in the street which had compelled her to take refuge in Mr. Crimp's sponging-house, she became the object of additional interest on that account.

"Madam," said the young lady, addressing herself to Mrs. Fitzherbert, "I am delighted on the one hand to have the honour of forming your acquaintance; but I am deeply distressed on the other that our first meeting should take place in such a den. May I hope that your embarrassment is only temporary?—and may I add, without giving offence that if the resources which I can command be adequate to the purpose of accomplishing your liberation, I shall experience the greatest happiness in placing my means at your disposal."

"Such kindness from a stranger — a perfect stranger — deserves my sincerest gratitude," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, scarcely knowing what to think of the offer, whether it were a mere idle compliment or a genuine proposal.

"Is it possible that you have had some object in coming hither, Miss Plantagenet?" asked the Amazon, who began to suspect that the visit of the young lady might not be altogether so accidental an occurrence as it at first seemed.

"I can assure you, ladies, that ten minutes ago I had not the slightest notion of being in this house, nor in your company," said Miss Plantagenet, whose voice had that semi-masculine tone which is harmonious as a flute; and as she now spoke with the emphasis of sincerity, it sounded rich with its somewhat deep melody to the ear. "A few words will suffice to give those explanations which the master of the house could not altogether convey when he introduced me, in his own rough but honest style, into your presence. I live at the West-End and am entirely my own mistress, although so young. Having passed the evening with some friends in this neighbourhood, I expected my maid to fetch me home: but she did not come — and, in order to avoid giving any trouble at my friends' house, either in sending for a hackney-coach or escorting me to one, I stole away from the party. Close by this door I was insulted by some rude young men—whereupon the master of the house came forth and rescued me. Being very cold and much frightened, he proposed that I should warm myself and at the same time seek the company of two ladies whom he represented as being in the house at the moment, and whom he named. I then felt reassured—for I knew you both by reputation; and I am as happy to form the acquaintance of Lady Lade as that of Mrs. Fitzherbert. So much for the incidents that brought me hither. Now let me ask whether you will give me credit for sincerity in regard to the proposal I made just now?"—and as Miss Plantagenet put this question, she addressed herself to Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"Accident — or shall I say Providence?—has sent me two generous friends," observed the patrician lady, glancing from Miss Plantagenet to the Amazon and looking her gratitude at both. "But the amount for which I am incarcerated is large—very large—two thousand guineas and upwards—and the lawyer who has taken such harsh measures against me, is a severe and cruel man—a Mr. Rigden——"

"Rigden!" ejaculated Miss. Plantagenet, with a sudden start.

"Yes—do you know him?" inquired Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"A little—quite enough to be well aware that he is all you represent him to be—cruel and severe," observed Miss Plantagenet. "But nevertheless—if you have no other chance of releasing yourself, than by paying the full amount, I will not fly from my promise; and the sum shall be placed at your disposal in the morning."

"My dear young friend," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, taking both the hands of the visitress and pressing them warmly, "I know not how to express my gratitude to you for this unlooked-for—this unmerited—this generous kindness on your part."

"But remember, my dear madam, that it is necessary for you to remain here until the result of my negotiations in a certain quarter shall be ascertained," said Lady Lade: "because it is absolutely requisite to show a certain personage how you have been neglected by another exalted personage——"

"And in case of any disappointment or delay," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert, "I can accept the generous proposal of our new friend."

"Precisely so," observed the Amazon. "Let that be the understanding. But with this addition, however, that I may be permitted to furnish my quota of the amount requisite to accomplish your release—provided that our other plan should, as you suggest, either fail or experience delay."

"Again must I declare that Providence has sent me two of the kindest friends that any one placed, in such embarrassments as I, could possibly have," said Mrs. Fitzherbert. "But it is growing late—and perhaps Miss Plantagenet does not feel over well pleased at the idea of venturing forth alone once more."

"I will cheerfully accompany her home," exclaimed Lady Letitia: then, with a merry laugh she added, "And my Amazonian garb will serve to protect us both from insult. Or we can tell Crimp to send for a coach——"

"Were I at my own house," interrupted Mrs. Fitzherbert, with a heavy sigh, "I should ask Miss Plantagenet to favour me with her company until the morrow——"

"Oh! do not think that I will desert you, dear lady, because you happen to be placed in this embarrassment," cried Miss Plantagenet, the colour mounting to her cheeks and her eyes flaming up with a strange light. "No—it is precisely because you can *not* invite me to repose upon a bed of down and in an elegantly appointed chamber, that I must insist upon remaining with you until I see how far my humble services may be rendered available to your purposes, or to what extent any other plan which you have in view may succeed."

"Lady Lade proposes to pass the night with me," said Mrs. Fitzherbert: "but as she will be compelled to leave me the first thing in the morning, it would give me unfeigned pleasure and be performing an act of pure benevolence if you would stay with me until her return to-morrow night or early on the ensuing day——"

"Nothing will afford me greater pleasure," said Miss Plantagenet, evidently catching at the proposal with eagerness.

"Then we will be a merry party, although our mirth take place in a vile lock-up house!" exclaimed the Amazon. "Come, I will ring the bell and inform the servant that you and I," she added, turning towards Miss Plantagenet, "intend to keep our friend Mrs. Fitzherbert company."

The domestic was accordingly summoned; and when she received the proposed intimation and had retired, Mrs. Fitzherbert locked the door of the parlour and threw open that of the bed-room, saying, "It is time that we should seek repose, since you, dear Lady Lade, will have to rise early in order to start for Windsor."

The three ladies accordingly passed into the sleeping-room; and as there were but two beds, a little discussion commenced as to how the occupants thereof should be disposed. Mrs. Fitzherbert suggested that she and Lady Lade should sleep together, so as to accommodate Miss Plantagenet with a bed to herself: but Miss Plantagenet vowed and protested that she could not possibly sleep alone in a strange house—and thereupon the discussion was continued between the Amazon and Mrs. Fitzherbert as to which should take Miss Plantagenet as a companion. Each was most anxious to have her: but each was willing to yield up her society to the other. At length it was settled that Mrs. Fitzherbert should share her bed with the young lady; and this point being comfortably settled, the process of undressing commenced.

To the imagination of those who admire female beauty, and who look upon lovely woman as the connecting link between human nature and angelic perfection, it must be a delicious theme for reflection,—those three charming creatures assembled together, and whiling away in agreeable discourse the time occupied by the night toilette. Miss Plantagenet, it is true, bashfully kept aloof from Mrs. Fitzherbert and the Amazon: but these two ladies remained together to render mutual assistance in the little details of laying aside their apparel—and, even as women, they could not help admiring the glowing charms which they thus revealed to each other's eyes.

At length the process of undressing was terminated—the light was extinguished—and while the Amazon took possession of one couch, Mrs. Fitzherbert proceeded to enter the other, where Miss Plantagenet was already ensconced.

CHAPTER CLXXI.

THE PAUPER INVALID.

The night passed—and misty, damp, and dreary was the morning that crept slowly forth from the eastern horizon, like a sluggard who is loathe to leave a warm couch. And not only did the cheerless light steal in betwixt the ill-closed curtains of the bed-chamber in the sponging-house; but penetrated with even a still more gloomy effect into the infirmary of Whitechapel workhouse.

And taking leave for a short space of the three charming occupants of the best sleeping apartment in Mr. Crimp's abode, we must concentrate our reader's attention in the hospital-room of that spacious receptacle of pauperism to which we have just alluded.

For although it was in the time of the old Poor Law, which was far more merciful than the present

barbarian statute, yet was that particular workhouse full, as was every other workhouse in the kingdom then, and as they ever will continue to be, so long as the social system remains corrupt and rotten to its very core. For when the sons and daughters of toil have worn themselves out in producing all the elegances, luxuries, and refinements of life for the bloated, pampered, and despotic rich,—when the millions have exhausted all the vital powers of fibre nerve, and sinew, in toiling from dawn to darkness for the indolent, luxurious, and ungrateful few,—when labour has achieved its all for the behoof of idleness, and the bee is perishing from the fatigues imposed upon it by the unceasing demands of the drone,—when the over-tasked wretches of the proletarian race become prematurely old in the service of stern task-masters,—when the hewers of wood cannot cut another faggot, nor the drawers of water raise another bucket,—when the once sturdy labourer in the field is useful no longer, and the once skilful mechanic in the factory can no more compete with younger hands,—then away with them—away with them to the workhouse, and let them thank their stars that such places should be in existence for their accommodation!

Diabolical system!—accursed state of society! For thee, poor working man, the future has no promise. Toil arduously and severely as thou wilt, act honestly and uprightly as thou may'st, conduct thyself peacefully and docilely as thou can'st,—and yet thou reapest no reward in thine old age! When the fulness of years comes upon thee, and thy hair grows white, and thy limbs are feeble, and thou lackest not only the necessaries but also the comforts of life,—*then* what is thy destiny? Is it a little cottage—humble, and yet neat and cheerful,—with jessamine twining over the portico and roses blooming beneath the lattice,—so that thou mayest sit in front of thy porch of an evening and enjoy the blessed sun-set and the fragrant breeze, while thy grown-up children stand near, surveying thee with mingled love and veneration, and frolicksome grandchildren climb upon thy knees, play at horse with thy cane, and listen in infantine wonderment to hear thy great silver watch tick;—is all this the scene which constitutes the reward that in thine old age thou reapest for the arduous and honest toils of all the best years of thy life? Gracious God! how fearful is the contrast which the stern truth of the picture presents to our view! For, if we would seek for the worn-out working-man in the fulness of his years and his venerable decrepitude,—if we would follow the son of toil, from the rural scene where he is useful no longer, or from the factory where his skill is no more availing—if we would follow him to the end of his life's journey and trace his steps when age renders them slow and feeble, until he goes down into the damp solitude of the grave,—then must we seek the old, old man—*not* in a neat cottage, surrounded by a happy and loving family—but in the streets as a mendicant, in the felon's gaol as a vagabond, or in the workhouse as a pauper!

Such is the state to which the wretched, despised, oppressed race of British proletarians is reduced! But who hath crushed them thus effectually?—who hath enslaved them so infamously? The vain, proud, indolent, and rapacious Aristocracy! And this same Aristocracy it is whose infatuation is so complete that it believes its own barbarian institution proof against the continuous though silent pressure of truth: this same Aristocracy it is that will take no warning from the signs of the times, but persists in maintaining the industrious millions in a condition of serfdom and wretchedness;—this same Aristocracy it is that monopolises the government, and is so thoroughly incompetent to govern! Nay, more: this very self-same Aristocracy, in its astounding impudence and inflated presumption, refuses the millions their rights on the plea that they are too ignorant to know how to use them: whereas the real intelligence and the sterling common sense of the country are to be found in the contemned, insulted, and outraged masses! There is as much difference between the Aristocratic Mind and the Working Class Mind, as there is between the gew-gaw frippery and finery of a fashionable milliner's show-room, and the stupendous though rugged grandeur of the Alpine mountains!

But to resume the thread of our narrative.

Opening from one extremity of the infirmary in Whitechapel workhouse, was a much smaller room, which was used for patients who required to be kept particularly tranquil. On the occasion to which we are now referring, it happened that in "the little infirmary," as it was called, there was only one invalid;—and this was a man who had been admitted at his own request, a few days previously, in consequence of some very severe injuries which he had received.

The man of whom we are speaking, awoke in the wretched pallet where he lay stretched, just as the first glimmering of dawn rendered visible the frame-work of the window facing that pauper-couch. A sensation of violent thirst immediately began to torture him: he stretched out his arm, with a painful effort, to feel if any refreshing beverage had been placed by the bed-side—but there was none!

"Neglect—cruel neglect—always neglect—nothing but neglect!" he murmured to himself. "I heard the doctor tell the nurse a dozen times to be sure and let me have barley-water to drink—and that she must moreover come in to see how I was at least three or four times in the course of the night. But, no—no! I have awakened at every hour—I have heard the clock strike on every occasion since eight last night—and I am sure that no one has been near me! Ah! one may die of neglect in this accursed place! No heathenish cruelty can be greater than that with which the poor are treated in this Christian country!—Christian country, indeed!" spoke the patient, in a louder and more emphatic tone: "the diabolical tyranny which is practised in this land of Bibles and Exeter Hall rantings, is enough to make infidels and atheists of us all!"

Then, ceasing to give utterance to his thoughts—but not ceasing to think profoundly and more bitterly still upon his wrongs—the invalid remained tranquil for some time, while the dawn advanced slowly but perceptibly, bringing into relief all the cheerless features of that hospital-chamber.

At last the tortures of thirst became intolerable;—and though at the risk of drawing down upon himself the vengeance of a sottish, surly, unfeeling nurse, the invalid was compelled to raise his voice and implore a drop of drink.

Not the slightest notice was taken of his appeal: but, maddened by the burning sensation which that feverish thirst produced, the invalid continued to call for water. At one moment his demand was made in the language of a suppliant: then it was accompanied by a remonstrance against the unfeeling neglect of which he was the victim;—and then it was followed by bitter, bitter complainings against the tyranny of the world's institutions.

"For the love of God! give me drink—give me drink—I implore you! Oh! pray do bring me some water! I am sorry to cause trouble: but this burning thirst distracts me. Ah! wherefore should you treat me with this cruel neglect? I would not behave so to you. Nurse! give me water, I implore you! I would not treat a dog as I am treated, though a man and a Christian! But, Oh! better, far better to be one of the King's hounds* in this country, than one of the doomed race of working-men! Holy God! how is it possible that millions of men can tolerate such an atrocious social system? Give me water, I say—bring me drink—or I will drag myself from this straw mattress—I will yell, howl, and scream—I will raise the whole house——"

"You infernal noisy troublesome pauper!" growled the hoarse voice of an elderly woman from the adjoining room; "will you hold your tongue?"

"I am perishing with thirst," moaned the wretched man in a stifling tone—for his throat seemed as if it were parched with hot ashes.

"Well, perish and be damned!" exclaimed the woman, who was indeed the night-nurse of the infirmary, as she flung open the door which separated the two rooms and appeared upon the threshold in a flannel gown tied loosely round the waist, and a dirty nightcap with great frills flapping over her face.

The appearance of this female was altogether disgusting in the extreme. Her face was full, round, rubicund, and greasy: her nose was pimpled—her eyes were watery—her teeth large and yellow. Being very fat, and having on no stays, her person resembled an enormous sack filled with bran and tied round the middle with a rope. Her duty was to sit up at night and attend upon the patients: but she usually slept more soundly and snored more loudly than any of them

"Now then, you cussed pauper," she cried, after the invalid had once more besought her to give him some drink; "do you suppose I've got nothing to do but to wait on your whims and put up with your nonsense? What do you mean, I should like to know, by lying there grumbling in that way? Now, come, one of you little uns," cried the nurse, turning round and addressing a group of children in the room whence she had emerged;—"one of you look sharp and bring this here feller some water out of that jug on the table—for there isn't no barley-water. I hadn't time to make none last night."

"It's a shame to let children come up into the hospital-rooms at all," muttered an invalid who lay in the larger apartment.

"What do you mean by saying as how that anything's a shame?" demanded the night-nurse, turning fiercely away from the threshold and advancing straight up to the bed of the poor devil who had let slip the unfortunate observation. "Suppose the beadle comes and knocks at the gate at nine o'clock in the evening, with three or four children at his heels, which he picked up starving and crying in the open street?—and suppose that the whole workus is so full that there isn't a atom of room to stow away the new-comers, except up here in the 'firmary? Well, then, if you suppose all this, you'll just suppose the real truth which happened last night: and now I should like to know where's the shame of putting these young uns up in this place."

The invalid who had volunteered the unfortunate objurgatory remark which evoked this long tirade, held his peace; and the woman turned her rheumy eyes upon the children of whom she had been speaking.

The juvenile group consisted of three: one was a boy of about thirteen—another was a boy of eight—and the third was a girl of six years of age. Three veritable skeletons were they—emaciated to a degree that would have caused the flesh of any humane person to creep upon the bones merely to cast one glance upon these poor children. And as if the scandal to civilisation, to Christianity, and to the social system, should be more complete, these living skeletons were clothed in such utter rags and tatters, that all the ghastly details of their emaciation were laid bare to the view,—so that their ribs might be counted one by one, the deep holes in their necks be scrutinised with anatomical nicety, and the whole frame-work of their bones be scrutinised as it were through the fleshless skin that covered them.

These three objects of wretchedness had just risen from the mattress where they had slept, huddled together;—and having put on their rags—that mockery of a clothing—by some undefinable means or another, they were whispering in low and tremulous tones, when the night-nurse called the elder boy to her.

In obedience to her commands, he filled an earthenware mug with water, and carried it into the "little infirmary" adjoining. But scarcely had his eyes encountered those of the invalid who lay alone in that room, when an ejaculation of mingled wonderment and delight burst from the boy's lips; and, dropping the mug, he sprang into the man's arms.

"Father—dearest father!" were the words that now fell from his tongue.

"My son—my own poor boy!" sobbed the invalid, as he strained the wretched object of misery to his breast.

And these ejaculations had reached the ears of the other two children;—and, immediately comprehending that their father was found at last, they ran into the adjacent room to receive his caresses; and he wept over them in their turn.

Thus was it that James Melmoth, the workingman, had his three children restored to him,—*he* lying in the pauper-bed of a workhouse, and *they* presenting to his appalled view the harrowing spectacle of such unsurpassable misery!

The night-nurse had followed the two younger children into the room; and she therefore became an eye-witness of the affecting scene which thus took place. But the woman was not moved by the

* And so it is at the present day. The royal staghounds and Prince Albert's dogs are better treated than the sons and daughters of toil.

sight: she had been too many years in that workhouse and had seen too much of pauperism and its miseries not to have her soul hardened, tanned, toughened, and rendered sympathy-proof. She accordingly gazed for a few moments in stolid curiosity upon that family group, thus re-united within the walls of a poor-house;—and then leaving those skeleton children and that invalid father to mingle their tears, their sobs, and their caresses, the woman turned back into the large room of the infirmary to pass her comments upon the incident and brew herself some nice strong coffee.

"O father!" sobbed the eldest boy; "what has become of you all this time? Do you know—do you know——"

"That your mother is——" murmured the other lad.

"Dead!" whispered the eldest, in a voice that was only just audible.

"Yes—yes—I know it—I know it!" exclaimed Melmoth, throwing himself back upon the pillow and pressing his hand to his forehead—as if he could thereby shut out some horrible reminiscence from his brain.

"But how *did* you know it, dear father?—how *could* you know it?" inquired the eldest lad. "You were not with us *then*—we have not seen you since until *now*——"

"And yet I know that my poor wife is dead—that your unfortunate mother perished of want, grief, and wretchedness," interrupted Melmoth, in the deep tone of mingled rage and despair "But do not ask me how I know it, boy——it was in a dream—a horrible dream——a dream such as I would not dream over again—no, not for worlds! My God! when I think that I beheld my poor wife stretched in the narrow coffin—with the moon shining upon her marble countenance——"

"O father! don't go on like that!" exclaimed the eldest boy, sobbing bitterly: for he began to fear lest sorrow had deranged the intellects of his only surviving parent. "I suppose you must have heard of poor mother's death somehow or another?"

"Well, well," said the working-man, the convulsions of his countenance showing that he was wrestling with some internal anguish of a fearful nature. "Let us talk no more upon that point. But tell me, James—tell me——the baby——"

"Dead—dead likewise," murmured the lad. "Poor baby!"

"Poor baby!" echoed the other boy; and then he and his little sister began to cry piteously.

"I can scarcely repine if God has taken my innocent babe unto himself," observed Melmoth, in a low and trembling voice. "But tell me how it happened—all about it——"

And lying flat upon his back, he covered his face with his hands.

"You see, father," began the eldest boy, "it was on the door-steps of a rich mansion at the West End that mother sank down and died."

"Could you lead me to the spot, James?" demanded Melmoth, without removing his hands from his face—so that his voice sounded hollow, as if emanating from a cavern.

"Yes—I am sure I could," replied the boy, bursting into tears. "My God! I shall never forget that moment! And then," he continued, amidst many vain attempts to subdue the sobs that broke his voice and nearly suffocated him,—"and then the beadle came and took us to the workhouse, and baby was given to an old woman to nurse, in the female paupers' ward. Next morning poor baby was found dead by the woman's side——"

"Poor baby!" murmured Melmoth, who lay stretched out and motionless as a carved statue on a tumular monument.

"The doctor was sent for—but the regular one being absent at the time, another came," proceeded young Melmoth, "and he said something about the child being overlaid. I don't know exactly what it was, although I was present at the time in the room where poor baby's body lay and where the doctor came to look at it. But I am perfectly sure that the old woman to whom baby was entrusted, was accused of having gone to bed tipsy. However, the doctor said it had better be hushed up—and he had baby's body taken to his house—to examine it, I think they said: but I never heard any more about it——"

"And was there no funeral for baby?" inquired Melmoth, in a deep low tone.

"Not that I know of," responded the lad. "There was a funeral for mother; and I attended it. Brother and sister were said to be too little to go to it: but they cried very much, poor things! The funeral was a wretched affair—and the undertaker was very savage with me because I fell on my knees by the side of the coffin, and—and——"

"Go on, James—go on," said Melmoth, his voice becoming lower and deeper. "You fell down by the side of your poor mother's coffin——"

And I prayed God to bless you, father—and to bless my poor brother and sister," continued the lad, his words being scarcely intelligible on account of the agonising sobs that broke upon his articulation. "I did not pray God to bless poor dear mother's soul and take it unto himself—because I felt assured that she had gone to heaven! Yes—she had suffered too much on earth, and was too good, and too kind to us, not to have gone to heaven!"

"You are right, James," said Melmoth: "she has gone to heaven! And there she will not meet rich people to oppress her: for very, very few kings, queens, lords, and great folks, can possibly go to heaven! I know it—I am sure of it! I have had glimpses of heaven as well as of hell—and I have seen that those who are miserable and trampled upon in this world, become happy in the next—whereas those who are pampered, luxurious, and despotic on earth, are the very ones that people hell hereafter. And if this were not so, where would be the justice of God?"

"Yes—you are right, father—you must be right," said the boy. "I cried much—very much—when poor mother was put into the ground; and I should like to have seen baby buried—I mean that I might have prayed over her——"

"But you tell me that the body was sent to the doctor's house and that you never heard any more of it?" said Melmoth, inquiringly.

"Such was the case, father," returned the lad, still sobbing heavily.

"And do you know where that doctor lived, or what his name was?" demanded Melmoth,

"His name was Thurston—and he lived somewhere at the West End—in May Fair, I think they said," replied the lad.

"Good! I shall not fail to remember it," observed Melmoth, with a deep and ominous concen-

tration of feeling evident in his tone. "And now tell me how you came to leave that workhouse at the West End and find your way into this."

"The master of the workhouse at the West End let us be together until after mother's funeral," continued the lad; "and then he wanted to separate us—I mean to put me and brother into one ward, and sister into another. But sister cried so dreadfully that I would not let her be taken from me; and as we were obliged either to submit to the rules or leave the place, we chose the last. So we were turned out one morning—each with a piece of bread—and in our rags——"

"My God! my God!" murmured Melmoth, who still kept his face covered with his hands: but the shaking of the bed beneath him showed how terribly his form was convulsed with the workings of his inward emotions.

"And so we had to beg our bread again, as we did when mother was alive," continued the lad; "and a shocking time we had of it. But I need not make you more unhappy than you are, dear father, by describing to you the dreadful hardships we have undergone. You may be sure—oh! you may be sure," exclaimed the boy, with all the enthusiasm of sincerity, while the big tears rolled down his pale sunken cheeks and his voice vibrated with the tremulousness of deep feeling,—"you may be sure that whenever I did get anything, dear little sister was taken care of first—and brother next—and myself last——"

"O God! O God! this is almost more than I can bear," murmured Melmoth, writhing in the pauper-bed as if he were struggling against some invisible fiend sitting upon his breast like a night-mare. "Very terrible is the history of poverty, O Lord!—and that tale is the history of millions and millions on the face of the globe! Oh! if thou art really a God of justice, reveal thyself as such and put an end to a state of things which thy goodness would not have engendered of its own free will!"

"Father—dear father—do not reproach the good God to whom my poor mother always taught me to pray," whispered the lad in a tone of gentle but earnest remonstrance.

"I was wrong, my boy—wrong!" said Melmoth. "But there are moments in our lives when we doubt the existence of everything good, because we see that the world is ruled by everything bad. And yet *I* should not be sceptical—no, not I, of all living men!" added the pauper-invalid, his voice suddenly resuming its tone of profound solemnity. "For I have seen heaven in my dreams—aye, and hell too——"

"Father—dear father—do not talk in that way any more!" cried the lad. "But tell me what is the matter with you—how long have you been ill—why you did not seek us out——And, Ah! this reminds me that four or five days before poor mother's death, she told us that you had returned to London—that she was quite sure you had—for that she had overheard your voice in the room where she slept one night—a miserable place, in a lodging-house: and the room was quite dark at the time when you came in—and poor mother fainted for joy on recognising your voice—but when she recovered her senses again, you were gone! And it was while roving about in all directions looking for you, that poor mother fell down on the door-steps—and died——"

"I remember the incident to which the statement you have just made must refer," said Melmoth. "There was a talk of Vampyrism in that dark room on the night whereof you speak," added the invalid, a low guttural noise like a ferocious chuckle mingling with his words like an under-current of sound, as if a fiend was echoing his words in mockery. "Yes—I remember the occurrence well. But is it possible that you were all sleeping in that room on the particular night in question?"

"Such was the case," replied the lad. "And now pray give me some account of yourself, dear father—and what ails you——"

But at this moment the boy's questions were cut short by the entrance of the surgeon, followed by the regular nurse belonging to the infirmary, and who was a woman somewhat more respectable in appearance though scarcely more agreeable in temper than the repulsive creature who had charge of the place during the night.

"Well, I understand that there is a singular recognition here—eh?" exclaimed the surgeon, who was a person of about five-and-thirty years of age, off-hand in his manner, but by no means harsh nor dictatorial, and as devoted to his profession as any enthusiastic lover of a particular art or science can possibly be. "Poor children!—poor man!" he observed, in a voice through which a tone of sympathy penetrated. "The meeting was a happy one in some respects, doubtless—but in others—— Ah! well," he cried, suddenly interrupting himself and shaking his head solemnly: "we must endeavour to bear up against misfortune in this world."

"It is easy, sir, for those to speak thus who have never known what starvation—houselessness—cold—and weary wanderings are," said Melmoth. "But I thank you for the compassion which your looks imply—and also for the attentions which I have received at your hands during the few days I have been here."

"Well, well—I have done the best I could for you, my man," exclaimed the surgeon. "In the course of a week we shall put you upon your legs again, I haven't the slightest doubt."

"Thank God!" whispered the eldest boy to his brother and sister: "in a week father will be well."

"Meantime," continued the surgeon, "we must take care of these young ones for you. Poor things! they are in a dreadful condition—a dreadful condition! I will place them on the sick list, so that they may be up in the infirmary and able to see you as often as you like. Besides, they can have a little broth and Port wine—and such-like strengthening things—do you hear, Mrs. Bodkin?"

"Yes, sir—I hear, sir," answered the nurse, with a simper. "I'm sure they *do* want Port-wine bad enough, sir, poor things!" she added, as she swept her eyes over the miserable objects huddling near their father's bed: for the woman was always glad when the surgeon ordered wine for the invalids, inasmuch as she invariably appropriated two-thirds of the allowance to her own use.

"Well, then," continued the doctor, "take the children away for the present—send them to the bath—let them have warm clothing—and put them down on the sick list. I'll sign the certificates by and bye."

The children accordingly took a temporary leave of their father;—and the surgeon was left alone with his patient.

CHAPTER CLXXII.

MISS PLANTAGENET.

Scarcely was it daylight when the occupants of the best bed-chamber in Mr. Crimp's sponging-house, rose from their couches and commenced their toilette. The Amazon was full of spirits: for she had slept soundly—had dreamt agreeable things concerning Tim Meagles—and was well pleased with the mission which she had volunteered to undertake to Windsor Castle.

But Mrs. Fitzherbert was somewhat silent and pensive; and the huntress soon began to rally her upon what the harum-scarum creature naturally fancied to be lowness of spirits on the part of th captive lady. As for Miss Plantagenet—she onl studied now to keep aloof from that part of th chamber where Letitia was performing her toilett and thus the young lady and Mrs. Fitzherbe remained together, assisting each other in th details of dressing; whereas it was Mrs. Fitzhe bert and the Amazon who had thus stuck close b each other on the preceding evening.

"What ails you this morning, my dear friend? asked Lady Lade, as she began to imprison h fine bust in the corset which was utterly incom petent to add a tittle to the superb elegance of h shape as a woman, but which was necessary t give the proper "fit" to the frock-coat which sh was presently to assume. "You are quite reserve melancholy, and silent," she continued, peepin round the curtains at Mrs. Fitzherbert, who wa not quite so far advanced as herself in the busine of the toilette.

"Pray do not think that I am reserved, my dearest friend," said the captive lady. "Reserve towards you would be ingratitude."

"Oh! I did not mean anything so serious as that," exclaimed the Amazon, once more protruding around the curtains that countenance which was so splendidly handsome and so radiant in the natural light of its good-humoured smiles. "But wherefore does Miss Plantagenet avert her head as if I were a gay gallant peeping round at her virgin loveliness?"

"My dear Lady Lade! what are you talking about?" cried Mrs. Fitzherbert, blushing from the very crown of her head down to the bosom: then, as she hastily began to comb out her long hair of golden flaxiness, she purposely threw it all dishevelled over her shoulders and neck to veil that deep carnation glow which had so suddenly spread beneath her camellia-like skin.

"What am I talking about?" echoed the Amazon, laughing heartily: "surely I have said nothing to shock you, my dear friend? You seem quite confused—and really if I were a young gentleman in female apparel, instead of being a lady in male attire, it would be impossible that you could blush more deeply, or Miss Plantagenet conceal herself with more precipitate affright behind the bed-curtains."

"Confused, my dear Lady Lade—I am sure I cannot be confused—I have nothing to be confused at," faltered Mrs. Fitzherbert, as she continued to comb out her back hair, leaving the myriads of shining ringlets hanging over her countenance like a veil.

"Ah! I hear Miss Plantagenet laughing!" cried the Amazon, in the same jocular and good-humoured vein. "Well, I suppose there is some joke which I do not comprehend—or that something has escaped my lips the double purport of which I neither saw nor intended. Have your jests, my dear friends, by all means. I would sooner know that you are making merry, even at my expense, than see you dull, reserved, moping, and miserable."

While thus speaking, the hilarious Amazon put on her frock-coat; and, her toilette being completed, she passed into the sitting-room to assure herself that preparations for breakfast were in progress. The survey of the table being so far satisfactory, she rang the bell to inquire for a porter;—and, when a functionary of that useful class made his appearance, she despatched him up to the West End to order Master Wasp (whom she had taken into her service during the absence of Meagles) to bring down her horse to Chancery Lane with the least possible delay.

Having taken this step, the huntress returned into the bed-chamber for the purpose of hastening her friends with their toilette: and perceiving that Mrs. Fitzherbert was performing some little service for Miss Plantagenet, Letitia very naturally offered to take the pleasing task on herself, so as to leave Mrs. Fitzherbert free to continue dressing without interruption. But Mrs. Fitzherbert would not think of resigning the agreeable duty of aiding Miss Plantagenet; and Miss Plantagenet shrank so much into the obscurest part of the room, that the huntress really began to fancy the young lady's modesty must be of a very extreme and ultra-delicate nature, inasmuch as it recoiled thus affrightedly from the mere aspect of a male costume, although known to be worn by a female. But the huntress was too much occupied with her projected visit to Windsor to bestow much thought upon Miss Plantagenet's peculiarities or the wondrously close friendship which had sprung up between this young lady and Mrs. Fitzherbert;—and returning into the parlour, Letitia looked out of the barred window and hummed an opera air until her two friends, having finished their toilette at last, came to join her at the breakfast-table.

And now it was a fair and pleasant sight to behold these three charming creatures sitting in agreeable companionship and illumining with their bright looks the dusky and cheerless apartment. The Amazon always had a good appetite, and failed not to eat heartily upon the present occasion; while her laugh, so merry and yet so musical, rang frequently through the room, as she still continued to rally both Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet on the singularity of their manner. For the former was every instant blushing without any apparent reason—and then the latter seemed to be overwhelmed with confusion;—now they would exchange looks of glowing rapidity but deep meaning—and then, again, they would endeavour to appear as if there were nothing at all peculiar either in their manner or their thoughts.

Lady Letitia was puzzled at all this: but still she was occupying herself as much with the mission which she had in hand, as with the eccentricities of her two companions, although she made them the exclusive subjects of her rattling discourse and hilarious mirth. Nor did she lose time over the breakfast-table: but, having done justice to the meal, she rose from her seat and advanced to the window to see if her equipage had arrived.

It was now nine o'clock; and the morning which had stolen forth in the midst of such unseasonable and even wintry gloom, was rapidly expanding into a sunny brightness more congenial to the period of the year. The thick, foggy, and unwholesome atmosphere of the preceding evening, which had made the rooms in Chancery Lane dark at five o'clock, and which had even endeavoured to stifle or delay the dawn of the day whereof we are now writing, had rapidly yielded to a warmer temperature and a clearer air—so that it really appeared at last as if youthful Spring had achieved her triumph over stern and remorseless Winter and was about to commence her placid reign.

For the incidents of our narrative, dating from the very commencement of January, 1795, and extending over a range of more than three months, have now brought us to the season when the trees begin to put forth their verdure and the singing of birds gladdens the rural scenery with untaught and discordant harmony. Or, to be as particular as possible with chronological details, we may observe that the day whose incidents we have begun to describe, alike in the Whitechapel workhouse and the lock-up in Chancery Lane, bore the date of April 5th.

And it is because this date was a memorable one in the existence of George, Prince of Wales and in the history of the British nation, that we have thus particularized it.

The clocks were striking nine, then, and the sun was beginning to shine with a cheerful and even

potent lustre, as Lady Lade looked forth from the barred window of the sponging-house parlour, while Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet remained still seated at the breakfast-table.

But scarcely had the Amazon stationed herself at the window, thereby turning her back towards her two friends, when the unmistakable sound of a kiss was wafted, in its billing and half-suppressed softness, to her ear. She hastily turned round; and perceiving that both Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet were covered with confusion at having been thus detected in the furtive token of attachment in which they had just indulged, she burst forth into one of those merry laughs which displayed the ivory beauty of her teeth and enhanced the glow of animation that was natural to her countenance.

But as this incident was uppermost in her mind, and as she looked at Miss Plantagenet, a thought flashed across her brain with the vividness of lightning. That little incident of the kiss was the spark which suddenly kindled a whole train of latent circumstances into the blaze of a startling suspicion;—and by the peculiar expression of mingled wonderment and archness which settled all in a moment upon her handsome countenance, both Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet saw that the secret was at least suspected, if not entirely read.

"Oh! this is the most amusing—the most delicious—the most interesting adventure that ever took place!" exclaimed the Amazon, flinging herself upon a seat and bursting into such a hearty peal of merriment that the tears ran down her cheeks.

"What do you mean?—what is it that you allude to?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, starting up, and speaking in a voice of hysterical hastiness, while the deepest scarlet suffused itself over her face and neck—down to the superb bosom which the morning-wrapper more than half revealed.

"Surely our dear friend has got some strange notion in her head?" observed Miss Plantagenet, also rising from her chair and exerting herself with the tensely straining energy of desperation to surmount the confusion which was overwhelming her.

"Oh! it is delicious—capital—glorious—exquisite!" exclaimed the Amazon, her laugh redoubling its joyousness, and her mirth denoting so much good-humour and such a total absence of anything savouring of maliciousness, that Mrs. Fitzherbert began to feel more assured—or rather, less excruciatingly uncomfortable—and smiles mingled amidst the blushes that covered Miss Plantagenet's countenance.

But in the midst of this curious scene, the door was suddenly opened; and Master Wasp, the young page whom Lady Lade had taken into her service since Meagles' expatriation, appeared upon the threshold.

"Now I will take my departure," cried the Amazon, springing to her feet and subduing her mirth: then, throwing an arch look upon Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet, she said, "I have not the slightest doubt you will manage to while away the time during my absence. But fear nothing: I am no tale-bearer—the secret is safe——"

"Please your ladyship," interrupted Wasp, speaking in a tone so unusually serious and gloomy that it instantaneously struck upon the Amazon's mind like a presentiment of evil,—"I wish to say a few words to you without delay—and in private," he added, glancing towards Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet.

"You can speak out, Wasp," exclaimed the huntress. "These ladies are friends of mine—and I have no secrets with them: although," she observed, with another rapid look of slyness at the objects of her remark, "they do not always treat me with the same generous confidence."

"But something very, very serious has happened, my lady," said the young page, who seemed to have totally lost his wonted mischievous sharpness of look and manner.

"Then speak out at once, my boy," exclaimed the Amazon, now paying more attention to that altered demeanour on his part.

"Please your ladyship, Sir John Lade——" faultered the lad, with increased embarrassment of manner and deeper gloom of countenance.

"Ah! what of my husband?" demanded the huntress. "Has he come in person to look after me?—and is he annoyed that I should have stayed away from home all night? If so, he can soon satisfy himself that my time has been passed in the company of two *ladies*," she added, her humourous vein suddenly reviving as she cast a rapid glance of sly significancy upon Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet.

"Alas! your ladyship will never see Sir John again—at least—not alive—or in this world," observed Wasp, with a faultering tone.

"Good heavens! what do you mean?" cried the Amazon, all remembrance of the incident which had ere now so exquisitely tickled her fancy, vanishing in a moment. "Has anything happened to Sir John?—is he——"

"Dead, my lady," said Wasp, finishing in solemn voice that sentence which her own excitement had prevented her from completing.

"Dead!" ejaculated the Amazon: "is it possible?"

Then, turning aside, she gave way for upwards of a minute to the feelings which this announcement suddenly stirred up in her bosom.

Sir John Lade had given her rank and position in society; and he had endowed her with wealth. She had been his pet and darling—his joy and his pride; and the reader has already seen enough to prove that she was entirely her own mistress and had nothing to apprehend on the score of a husband's jealousy or ill-temper. In sooth, she had been allowed to do just as she chose—to keep whatever hours might happen to suit her—to go out and return home unquestioned and unwatched—and to wear her masculine apparel at her own good will and pleasure. But in return for so much indulgence on her husband's part, what had she done? It was true that her bearing towards him invariably appeared affectionate and tender, and that she sometimes devoted a few hours to him when he wished her to assume the attire becoming her sex and accompany him in the carriage or preside at his dinner-table: but, generally speaking, her time had been spent in pursuits apart from the sympathies and duties of a wife. Mad pranks with dissipated young men—gallantries and intrigues—the connexion with Meagles—and all the various diversions which sustained her cha-

nster alike as an Amazon and as one of the most dissolute beauties of the age,—these had been the features of that unbounded licentiousness with which she had repaid her husband's fond indulgence and foolish confidence.

No wonder, then, that tears now trickled slowly down her cheeks as the whole picture of her career presented itself to her memory and passed before her mental vision with dioramic effect: no wonder that she sighed and felt dull as she reflected that the old man who had loved her so tenderly was no more, and that under whatsoever circumstances he had breathed his last, *she* was not there to receive his parting words nor smooth his dying pillow!

"Tell me, my boy, how *this* happened," said the Amazon, at length turning towards the youthful page, and speaking in a voice that was indeed much changed from the gay hilarity which had so recently thrilled through the room.

"It was a sudden fright, my lady—caused by something which I have yet to explain," observed Wasp.

"Ah! then unpleasant things have occurred?" exclaimed the huntress. "But of what nature could they be? Speak, my boy—and keep me not another moment in suspense."

"Late last night, my lady," resumed Wasp, "two men came to the house and declared that they had an authority to search the premises. I instantly recognised one of those persons——"

"Who was he?" demanded the Amazon.

"Germain, the Prince's French valet," was the reply.

"Ah!—*this* is indeed important!" ejaculated Lady Lade, flinging a glance of mingled interest and trepidation upon Mrs. Fitzherbert, whose countenance suddenly assumed an expression indicative of the presentiment of evil which simultaneously sprang up in her mind.

"Yes—one was Germain, my lady," resumed Wasp; "and the other announced himself to be a messenger from the Home Office."

"Good heavens!" cried Lady Lade: "what could such a visit portend?"

"They said that your ladyship was suspected to have been leagued with certain seditious individuals whom the authorities had already sent out of the country," continued Wasp; "and as the Habeas Corpus remains suspended, the Home Office had power to enforce search warrants granted by the magistrates in such cases."

"The Prince is at the bottom of all this!" murmured the Amazon, speaking hastily aside to Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"Perhaps he knows that you are with me, and has conjectured the course which you intended to pursue on my behalf?" observed Mrs. Fitzherbert, from whose cheeks had now fled all the blushes with which the preceding incident of the kiss had suffused them, and whose whole form was quivering with the nervous excitement of mingled suspense and terror. "Oh! he is capable of wreaking upon us the direst revenge—I know he is!" added the unhappy lady shudderingly, as she thus revealed her acquaintance with one of the darkest traits in the character of the Prince.

"Let us hear the end of all this," said the Amazon; "and we shall then know what to think. For my part, I am overwhelmed with consuming terrors concerning the safety of my papers. Go on, boy," she cried, turning again towards Wasp.

"Germain and the messenger came last night at about twelve o'clock," continued the page; "and when Sir John Lade heard the nature of their business, he was seized with a sudden tremor and became speechless. The servants carried him up to bed—the physicians were sent for—but he never spoke again—and in less than an hour——"

"He was a corpse," added the huntress, in a low and mournful voice. "Poor Sir John!" she exclaimed, the accents of compunction vibrating in her tone.

"While that sad scene was taking place in one room," continued Wasp, "the two men were ransacking the furniture and cupboards in all the others."

"And the writing-desk in the safe in my bed-chamber?" demanded the huntress, no longer able to restrain her impatience, and yet putting a question to which she dreaded to receive an answer.

"They found it, my lady," said Wasp: "they opened it——"

"Enough!" cried the Amazon: "I wish to hear no more."

"Then your worst fears are confirmed?" whispered Mrs. Fitzherbert, hastily.

"Yes—and I am now powerless to assist you at Windsor," responded Lady Lade, in a low deep tone of concentrated rage: then, with a sinister gloom upon her countenance lately so radiant with smiles, and her fine white teeth closely set, she whispered hissingly, "But I will be revenged, as sure as there is a God in heaven!"

Both Mrs. Fitzherbert and Miss Plantagenet gazed upon the Amazon in dismay: for there was something ferociously terrible in her manner, her look, and her gesture as she gave utterance to that dark menace.

And it was at this crisis in the scene, that a carriage drove up to the door of the sponging-house, the arrival of which instantaneously attracted the inmates of the room to the barred window.

"Two ladies have alighted," said Mrs. Fitzherbert: "but they entered the house so abruptly that I could not distinguish their faces."

"But whose carriage is it?" demanded the Amazon.

"There are no arms upon the panels," replied Mrs. Fitzherbert; "and yet I should know that livery——Oh! if they be really visitors for me," she exclaimed, suddenly recollecting herself and turning round in affright towards Miss Plantagenet.

And this young lady was about to beat a precipitate retreat into the bed-room adjoining, when the door of the parlour itself was flung open by the obsequious Mr. Crimp—and the Duchess of Devonshire, accompanied by the Countess of Desborough, entered the apartment.

CHAPTER CLXXIII.

FRESH SCENES IN THE SPONGING-HOUSE.

MRS. FITZHERBERT was for an instant on the point of shrieking out and becoming overwhelmed with confusion—for she knew that the Duchess of Devon-

shire was at least certain, even if the Countess of Desborough was not likewise sure, to recognise Miss Plantagenet: but the desperate emergency of the case armed her with a sudden presence of mind the strength of which astonished even herself;—and springing forward, as if in the exuberance of a joyous gratitude to welcome her friends, she endeavoured to cover Miss Plantagenet's retreat into the adjacent room.

But the move was too late. For, quick as the glance only can pierce the air, did the Duchess of Devonshire instantaneously recognise Miss Plantagenet's features: and, darting forward, she caught the flying young lady by the arm, exclaiming, "Cousin! what masquerade mummery is this?"

"Hush, for God's sake!" whispered Miss Plantagenet, in a low but rapid tone, and accompanying the words with an imploring look.

At the same moment Mrs. Fitzherbert sprang forward to meet the Countess of Desborough; and that presence of mind on her part, by instantaneously engrossing Eleanor's attention, prevented her from observing the singular little bye-play which was taking place between the Duchess of Devonshire and Miss Plantagenet.

Meantime Wasp had withdrawn from the room—and the Amazon was only waiting until she could obtain an opportunity to wish Mrs. Fitzherbert farewell.

"Hush, for God's sake!" were the words which Miss Plantagenet had whispered in the ears of the Duchess of Devonshire, as we have above stated.

"What mummery is this, I demand?" inquired Georgiana, still preventing the young lady from beating a retreat, but dropping her own voice to that same tone of caution the infection of which she instantaneously caught.

"I will explain it all another time—do not betray me—but let me go ere the Countess recognises me," urged Miss Plantagenet, with accents and looks of fervid entreaty, as she strove to break away from the Duchess.

At that moment Eleanor, having exchanged greetings with Mrs. Fitzherbert, cast her eyes upon Miss Plantagenet; and the young lady could not therefore possibly beat the retreat which she was on the point of accomplishing, because such a proceeding would have been a flagrant rudeness and in itself calculated to excite the strangest suspicions.

"Introduce me as Miss Plantagenet," was the hasty whisper which she breathed in the ears of the Duchess of Devonshire, as she perceived Eleanor's eyes fixed upon her.

"My dear Countess," said Georgiana, with a smile so good-humouredly arch and a manner so softly frolicksome that it was evident she was enjoying the very good joke which she did not however mean to betray,—"my dear Countess, permit me to introduce you to my fair cousin, Miss Plantagenet—a young lady of whom you have doubtless never heard before, inasmuch as she has only recently arrived in London——"

"Indeed, I am almost certain that I have had the honour of meeting Miss Plantagenet on some former occasion," observed the Countess of Desborough, fixing her eyes upon the young lady with that expression of uncertainty and inquiry which showed that she was vainly taxing her memory to discover where she had seen those features before.

"It is possible that we may have met," said Miss Plantagenet, with her softest voice and most agreeable manner: "for this is not the first time that I have visited London——Indeed!" she exclaimed, as if struck by a sudden reminiscence, but really catching at the idea to which she was about to give utterance, because she thought that she perceived the earnestness of Eleanor's looks deepening into suspicion,—"indeed, it was at our mutual friend Mrs. Fitzherbert's apartments in Carlton House that we met."

"I do not recollect it," observed the Countess of Desborough—as indeed it would have been very singular if she had. "But it may be as you say, Miss Plantagenet. At all events, I am very certain that we *have* met before somewhere: for your features—pardon the personality of the remark—are as familiar to me as possible."

"And now, wherever it may be that we met before," said Miss Plantagenet, "on the present occasion we encounter each other under circumstances of a somewhat gloomy nature. Our dear friend here," and she looked towards Mrs. Fitzherbert, "has been the victim of cruel persecution——"

"Let us not touch upon the past, in any way," exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert emphatically: then, having suffered the most excruciating terror throughout the little dialogue which had just taken place between Miss Plantagenet and the Countess of Desborough on their introduction to each other, and anxious to turn the general attention as well as the discourse into other channels, she said, "But I had really forgotten to present you to Lady Lade, who has behaved towards me with the most signal, marked, and sister-like conduct—at a time, too, when all my friends appeared to have forsaken me."

"I was out of town, my dear Mrs. Fitzherbert, when your letter was delivered three or four days ago," said the Duchess of Devonshire, as she bestowed a slight and haughty inclination of the head upon the Amazon.

"And I was down at Stamford Manor until last night," added the Countess of Desborough, with an equally cold and reserved acknowledgment of Lady Lade.

A curl of sovereign contempt appeared for an instant upon the lips of the beautiful huntress, as she observed how unwelcome her presence was and how unpalatable this introduction appeared to be to the two patrician ladies.

"And now, my dear friend," exclaimed the Duchess of Devonshire, turning hastily towards Mrs. Fitzherbert, "do let us take you away from this horrid place at once. Eleanor and myself have united the contents of our purses for your use——But pray do get rid of that notorious character, Lady Lade," she added, suddenly interrupting herself and sinking her voice to the lowest possible whisper.

"I was much afflicted to hear of your embarrassments, when I came up to town last evening," said the Countess of Desborough: "and at daybreak this morning I arose—started off to Devonshire House—and was pleased to find that our friend Georgiana was meditating an immediate visit to you. So we forthwith came together——But what on earth is Lady Lade doing here?" suddenly demanded Eleanor, dropping her voice to a whisper in the same way as the Duchess had done a moment before.

"Pray be civil to Lady Lade," hastily murmured Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a tone of earnest entreaty, to the magnificent Duchess and the brilliant Countess: "she possesses an excellent heart——"

At that instant the door was opened hurriedly; and Wasp rushed in, exclaiming, "The Prince is coming! He has just entered the office down stairs and is asking the bailiff some questions!"

"The Prince!" shrieked Mrs. Fitzherbert in a dying voice, as she turned towards Miss Plantagenet.

"I shall not remain to meet his Royal Highness," said the Countess of Desborough, her countenance flushing with a sudden indignation as she thought of the outrage which the Prince had sought to perpetrate towards her on the memorable night of the grand ball at Carlton House.

"Then do you take my cousin away with you, Eleanor," said the Duchess of Devonshire, pushing both the Countess and Miss Plantagenet into the bed-room, the door of which Mrs. Fitzherbert had just shown presence of mind enough to open.

And as the door of the bed-chamber closed behind the Countess of Desborough and Miss Plantagenet, George Prince of Wales entered the sitting-room.

Wasp, the nimble page, shut the door behind him and withdrew down stairs again;—and his Royal Highness, taking off the hat which was slouched over his face, and turning down the fur collar of his cloak which had been drawn up so as to conceal all the lower part of his countenance, threw a rapid glance around to ascertain who were present.

Not deigning to take any notice of the Amazon, and only bowing with stately politeness to Mrs. Fitzherbert, the Prince extended his hand to the Duchess of Devonshire, observing in a careless sort of manner, "I did not expect to meet your Grace here."

"But I *did* expect to have heard that your Royal Highness had been here long ere this," said Georgiana, the natural generosity of her disposition prompting this remonstrance against his unfeeling conduct towards her friend Mrs. Fitzherbert.

"There are circumstances which do not always transpire in particular cases," said the Prince, with a cold look at *her* who was his wife in the sight of heaven,—"but which, if known, would alter the aspect of affairs"

Mrs. Fitzherbert started—grew red with indignation—and was about to speak: but suddenly recollecting that the Prince was aware of her amour with the Marquis de Bellois, and with the image of Miss Plantagenet likewise springing up into her mind, she felt herself suddenly grow pale as death, while her limbs became cold as marble and an icy tremor shook her entire form.

"I cannot conceive the existence of any circumstances which could induce your Royal Highness to leave our dear Fitzherbert for even as many hours as she has been days in this horrible place," said the Duchess of Devonshire, bravely and generously following up her first remonstrance by this second reproach.

"Perhaps your dear friend, in whom you are so deeply interested and whose part you take so warmly, will bestow her full confidence upon your Grace," observed his Royal Highness, with a scorching sarcasm in his tone and manner, as he threw another look pregnant with meaning upon the unhappy lady who was the object of his cowardly brutality.

"Ah! have I not loved you enough and made sacrifices enough for you, to induce you to be merciful?" she said, in a tone of deepest pathos and with such an appealing look from her fine blue eyes that, however great her frailties might have been, the anguished earnestness of that remonstrance was enough to have moved a heart of stone.

"As I am here to treat matters in purely a business-like point of view," returned the Prince, totally inaccessible to any generous feeling on her behalf, "it would perhaps be as well to avoid any extraneous comment. At all events, any revelations that may be made, will have been wilfully *provoked*—and not idly *volunteered*: even," he added with a malicious smile, "should the name of Miss Plantagenet be brought upon the *tapis*."

The Duchess of Devonshire started and bit her lip: for she now saw that the Prince, by some unaccountable means, had become aware of that secret—and she therefore comprehended a portion of the allusions which he had just been making and which poor Mrs. Fitzherbert had understood only too well. As for this unhappy lady herself, she was crushed—overwhelmed—annihilated by the last observation which had fallen from the Prince's lips, and which proved that even the mystery of the sponging-house, as we may denominate the Plantagenet affair, was known to him.

Pale as a corpse—her eyes fixed, yet staring wildly—with fire in the brain and ice at the heart, Mrs. Fitzherbert staggered back against the wall: otherwise she would have sunk down upon the floor.

"Has your Royal Highness any compliments to bestow upon me in my turn?" demanded the Amazon, who had hitherto been leaning against the bars of the window, with folded arms, and paying only a dim and misty kind of attention to all that was going on in her presence—her thoughts being chiefly occupied with the intelligence of her husband's death and the feelings the event had excited in her bosom.

"I presume you are aware of what has occurred at your own abode?" said the Prince, turning in a half-disdainful, half-indifferent manner towards her, as if he had his doubts whether he ought to notice her at all.

"I am aware that a couple of ruffians sent by you, Royal Highness not only frightened an old man to death by their brutality," said the Amazon, with dauntless tone and manner,—"but likewise ravaged the whole house for the object of their predatory visit."

"The persons whom your slanderous tongue libels as ruffians, were armed with legal authority," observed the Prince, with the haughty confidence and triumphant arrogance of a man who feels that he has got the best of his enemies. "They performed the duty that was assigned to them—and they retook possession of certain documents which had been scandalously and infamously plundered from me. Those documents, Lady Lade," added his Royal Highness, with mingled bitterness and ferocious joy, "are placed beyond your reach for ever! Neither stratagem nor violence can obtain them from me!

beware, then, how you attempt either! As for the death of your husband, I do not think that you have been so exemplary a wife as to give proof of any wondrous amount of affection for the old man."

"I am well aware that your Royal Highness is totally indifferent to a human life or two more or less," remarked the Amazon, her red lip curling in withering scorn; "the suicide of Foster the merchant, for example."

"Shall we blurt forth in alternate volleys all we know of each other?" asked the Prince, who for a moment had started, turned pale, and bitten his lip as that tremendous allusion was hurled at his head. "But perhaps you have no wish that I should proceed to rake in the mire and filth of Lukner's Lane, in order to discover the origin of a certain Letitia Flake?"

"Your Royal Highness has nevertheless made that same person the companion of your mirthful hours within the gilded walls of Carlton House," retorted the Amazon, in a tone of cool contempt and without the slightest indication of annoyance.

"Yes—because I was anxious to hear her recite some of the amusing rascalities of one of her earliest paramours, the celebrated Jack Rann who was executed at Tyburn," observed the Prince, nettled at the placid indifference with which the Amazon received his taunts.

"Your Royal Highness has profited well by such teachings," rejoined Lady Lade, still unmoved and slightly contemptuous: "for the very debates in the House of Commons upon your Royal Highness's debts, afford ample proof that the rascalities for which Jack Rann was hanged were mere trifles to the rascalities which your Royal Highness perpetrates with impunity."

"By the living God! *this* to the heir-apparent to the throne?" exclaimed the Prince, becoming purple for a moment and then turning white as a sheet.

"Yes—and a great deal more too," cried the dauntless Amazon, "if your Royal Highness be agreeable to continue this warfare of taunt and repartee."

"I have already forgotten myself enough," said the Prince, now recovering his wonted dignity. "Hark you, Lady Lade: we may as well come to an understanding together, as we now fight upon more equal grounds than when last we met."

"Do not think that because you have regained possession of the papers, I am completely in your power," observed the huntress. "Remember that the secrets contained in those documents are treasured up *here*;"—and she tapped her forehead significantly with the handle of her riding-whip.

"The secrets, without the documentary proofs to back them," said the Prince, "would be looked upon as mere scandal and idle tittle-tattle. Nevertheless, I do not wish to provoke your animosity farther than it may be already excited;—and therefore let there be at least a cessation of hostilities between us. I have got back my papers: in two or three weeks you will have back your Meagles—and let that suffice you."

"I accept the armistice," exclaimed the Amazon, after a few moments' reflection: then advancing towards Mrs. Fitzherbert, who was now conversing in a low tone with the Duchess of Devonshire, she said, "Madam, I bid you farewell. Should it ever be in my power to render you a service, you will find me willing to do so—if it be only to make suitable atonement for the wrong which Meagles inflicted upon you. Farewell!"

"Farewell, dear Lady Lade," returned Mrs. Fitzherbert, who, now that the Amazon was unable to assist her in obtaining a high title and a large pension, would not have appeared quite so friendly towards the good-natured huntress, were it not on account of the little secret touching and concerning Miss Plantagenet.

Lady Lade then bowed to the Duchess of Devonshire and took her departure.

"Now, madam," said the Prince, turning towards Mrs. Fitzherbert, the instant that the door had closed behind the widowed huntress, "I request your attention for a few minutes. From the observations which I ere now made, you have learnt that I am well informed upon certain matters, and that therefore I cannot possibly regret our separation. More explicit I do not wish to be—unless it were to observe that I came hither this morning for the purpose of ascertaining whether certain information which I received were really true, and that under the name and garb of *Miss Plantagenet*——"

"Wherefore say more upon that head?" exclaimed the Duchess of Devonshire. "The breach between yourself and Fitzherbert is past all power of healing; and it is evidently unnecessary to widen it. A grand change is about to take place in the position of your Royal Highness—your future bride arrived last evening in the Thames—to-day she comes to London——"

"Ah! then the event draws nigh?" murmured Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a tone indicative of deep emotion. "One wife in a prison — another in a palace——"

"Speak not in these terms!" exclaimed the Prince, bending harsh and angry looks upon the unhappy lady. "Whatever you may have been to me, you are nothing now. Nor can you be at a loss to comprehend my motives for saying this. The bare mention of the town of Plombiers should bring the burning blush to your cheeks——"

"Ah! this is cruel," murmured Mrs. Fitzherbert, covering her face with her hands—while the Duchess of Devonshire, who knew nothing of her friend's amour with the Marquis of Bellois, was at a loss to conceive the meaning of the allusion which had just affected her so powerfully.

"But as *if that* were not enough," continued the Prince, in a louder and more angry tone, "you entice hither your Lady Lades to plot with you, and your Miss Plantagenets——But, when I think of it," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself, "I should like to see how that maudlin sentimentalist, with all the sickly devotion of love and worship towards Miss Pauline Clarendon——"

And while he was yet speaking, his Royal Highness opened the bed-room door and walked into that chamber.

But he was disappointed in his hope of finding Miss Plantagenet there; and an open door, leading upon the landing, at once explained by which means the bird had flown.

"I learnt from the man down-stairs that two ladies had arrived in the carriage which I saw waiting outside," observed the Prince, returning into the parlour and addressing himself to the Duchess of Devonshire: "but the fellow did not know who the ladies were. *You* are one, Georgiana:—who was the *other*?"

"The Countess of Desborough accompanied me," was the immediate reply, given without a moment's reflection that there might be any harm in thus associating Eleanor's name with the sponging-house adventures.

"Now I presume her ladyship has gone away with Miss Plantagenet!" exclaimed the Prince: "is it not so? Ah! I see by your countenance, Georgiana, that I have guessed the truth! Upon my honour, this is capital—delicious!"

"But Eleanor," began the Duchess, by way of defending the Countess from any imputation which the Prince might fancy to throw upon her,—"does not for an instant suspect that her companion——"

"Better and better!" cried the Prince, in the exultation of a malicious glee. "Oh! this is admirable—admirable! The haughty Eleanor of Desborough undertaking to become the protectress and *chaperon* of Miss Plantagenet—from the door of a sponging-house to any other house into which the said Miss Plantagenet may choose to lead her ladyship——"

"Really your Royal Highness does not appear to have much use for your time, since you can afford to waste it in such idle scurrility," exclaimed the Duchess of Devonshire: for she was not only inclined to become the championess of her absent friend from those motives which in such a case prompt one woman to defend another; but she was likewise annoyed and disgusted at the whole tenour of the Prince's conduct on the present occasion. "To come to the point at once," she said, after a few moments' pause, "do you intend to release Fitzherbert from her present embarrassments, or leave that duty to be performed by her friends?"

"I have come hither to make Mrs. Fitzherbert a certain proposal," replied the Prince: then, drawing forth a packet of letters from beneath his cloak, and displaying them before the eyes of that lady, he said, "I presume, madam, that you recognise this correspondence?"

"I do," answered Mrs. Fitzherbert, instantaneously perceiving that the Prince held in his hand all the letters which she had sent to the Marquis de Bellois: and the blood rushed to her cheeks, a moment before so pale!

"The next step for me to take," continued the Prince of Wales, "is to count down five Banknotes of a thousand pounds each. There is the amount! And now," he added, opening a paper which he took from his waistcoat pocket, "here is a short deed setting forth and declaring that no marriage-ceremony nor any matrimonial rite was ever performed in any church, chapel, or private house, by any clergyman or priest of whatsoever denomination, between Mrs. Fitzherbert and myself——"

"And what is the object of that document?" demanded the lady, with feverish impatience.

"It is for you to sign, madam," responded the Prince, with the calm assurance of a man who knows that he can carry matters with a high hand against all opposition.

"Never!" ejaculated Mrs. Fitzherbert, her quivering lips becoming as bloodless as her countenance, while her whole form trembled visibly.

"Then listen, madam, to the observations I am about to make," said his Royal Highness. "Circumstances place me in a desperate position—and the proceedings I shall adopt will prove of an equally desperate character. Fortunately the authority of the Home Office backs me at this moment: otherwise, perhaps, you and my other enemies might stand a chance of triumphing over me. You refuse to sign this paper? Be it so: but I must warn you of the consequences."

"Dare you threaten me?" demanded Mrs. Fitzherbert, partially recovering her presence of mind in the face of the cold-blooded, brutal, heartless tyrant whose head had so often lain pillowed upon her bosom and upon whom she had been wont to lavish such tender caresses.

"I dare speak what I mean—aye, and perform what I threaten," he exclaimed, a sardonic smile for an instant wavering upon his lips, and proving that there was a tinge of fiendish malignity mingled amongst the other dark shades of his character. "Know, then, that if you refuse your signature to this document, madam, I shall at once release you from this place of captivity—but it will only be to have you hurried on board a ship and transported to North America! Remember that the Habeas Corpus Act is suspended; and your forced exile may be accomplished safely, securely, and immediately. The world will believe that the once gay and brilliant Mrs. Fitzherbert has voluntarily fled the country in order to avoid the consequences of those debts with which she is overwhelmed;—and should any satirist, pamphleteer, or scandalmonger, dare to publish aught wherein *her* name and *mine* are inconveniently associated, the correspondence with the Marquis de Bellois shall be printed and issued so that a true light may be thrown on the character of Mrs. Fitzherbert! What would the world say then? Why, that I—the Prince of Wales—had been made the dupe of a vile, profligate, intriguing woman;—and while all the indignation would be levelled against *you*, madam, all the sympathy would redound upon *me*. Then, with such a state of public feeling, of what utility would it be for *your* friends to publish anything *more* relative to our past connexion and its true nature? The popular voice would drown the echoes of any complaints which your adherents in this country might raise, while you would be powerless in a far-off clime! And if in addition to the revelations which your correspondence with the Marquis de Bellois contains, anything be wanting to convince the world of your real character, the incidents of the sponging-house——"

"Enough—enough!" murmured the unhappy woman, in a hoarse thick voice: for she felt the truth—the crushing, overpowering truth—of all the consequences which the heir-apparent thus mercilessly shadowed forth.

"In the name of heaven, let this scene draw to a speedy close!" exclaimed the Duchess of Devonshire, who was deeply affected on the one hand and incensed on the other—for while she pitied Mrs. Fitzherbert from the bottom of her soul, she was disgusted at the heartless conduct of the Prince.

"I am in his power—I am at his mercy," said the persecuted lady, clinging to the arm of the Duchess and bursting into tears. "Oh! what do you advise, Georgiana?—what shall I do?"

"Give your signature to the document, my dear friend," hastily whispered the Duchess: "resistance will be useless—opposition will ruin you altogether!"

"But he dares not perpetrate all the frightful outrages he has threatened," murmured Mrs. Fitzherbert, hastily drawing Georgiana aside.

"You see that his position is desperate—and he will do *anything* and *everything* that circumstances may suggest," was the reply given by the Duchess of Devonshire in the same low and scarcely audible tone as that in which Mrs. Fitzherbert had spoken.

"Well, what is the decision?" demanded the Prince, turning back again from the window to which he had advanced while the preceding colloquy of a few moments was hurriedly whispered between the two ladies.

"I will sign the paper," said Mrs. Fitzherbert, in a low and almost sepulchral tone, and with such an unnatural calmness of demeanour that it was positively more frightful to behold than the wildest rage could possibly have been: for it appeared as if a volcano were ready to burst forth from beneath that surface so terrible in its tranquillity.

Then seating herself at the table, and with a hand that was steadied by the nerve of desperation, she affixed her signature to the paper: but the moment that her name was traced thereon—indeed, before the eye had time to wink after the last letter of the word *Fitzherbert* was formed—she dashed down the pen with a frantic gesture, exclaiming as she started wildly from her seat, "There! I have sold myself as completely as if it were to Satan!"

Aye—and like Satan, too, did his Royal Highness smile with a malignant triumph as he snatched up the document from within the reach of the now fearfully excited lady; and spreading it open upon the opposite side of the table, he said, "Now Georgiana, you will have the kindness to attest it."

"I will have nothing to do with it!" exclaimed the Duchess, her countenance suddenly glowing with indignation, as she drew her magnificent form proudly up to its full height and cast a look of haughty anger upon the Prince.

"Then the bailiff must be summoned to attest the deed—that's all," observed his Royal Highness, with cool insolence.

"Ah! spare me this crowning indignity, Georgiana!" exclaimed Mrs. Fitzherbert. "Let us yield to the despotic will of——that heartless man," she added, the words hissing between her lips with the spite of a serpent.

"If it be your desire that I should sign the paper, my dearest friend," cried the Duchess, "I will do so: but not unless."

"Yes—better *your* attestation, Georgiana, than that of a stranger who will make the contents of this deed the subject of his tavern-talk," replied Mrs. Fitzherbert, with a thrilling acrimony in her tone.

The Duchess accordingly affixed her signature as witness to the deed, which the Prince instantly took up and secured about his person. He then pointed to the Bank-notes which lay upon the table—resumed his cloak and hat—bowed coldly and distantly to the two ladies—and quitted the room.

An hour afterwards Mrs. Fitzherbert, attended by one of the Duchess of Devonshire's lady's-maids, was proceeding in a travelling-carriage to her Grace's villa near Aylesbury, in which retirement the unhappy lady determined to remain until the bustle of the Prince's marriage should be over.

But, Oh! was it not with an aching heart and a reeling brain that she was now compelled to contemplate the overthrow of all her dearest hopes?—was it not with a deep, deep bitterness that in her soul she cursed that weakness on her part which had so seriously compromised her with the Marquis of Bellois and also in the affair of the self-styled Miss Plantagenet, as to enable her royal husband to seize upon those incidents as weapons to turn against herself?

Ruined—crushed—trampled under foot by the man who had so lately appeared to cherish her, the unhappy lady found but a partial relief in the floods of tears which the agonising sense of her fallen condition now wrung from her eyes, as she was whirled along the road towards that place of seclusion whither her wounded pride prompted her to fly!

CHAPTER CLXXIV.

LADY JERSEY.

On quitting the sponging-house, the Prince of Wales muffled himself up in his cloak in such a manner as to conceal his countenance so as to escape recognition; and in a few minutes he entered a plain carriage which was waiting for him near the bottom of Chancery Lane. He immediately ordered the coachman to drive to St. James's Palace, where the King, Queen, Princes, and Princesses—in fine, all the Royal Family—were assembled to receive Caroline of Brunswick, who was expected in a few hours. The Prince of Wales sought an immediate interview with his father *alone;* and when they were together, his Royal Highness handed him the document which Mrs. Fitzherbert had just signed in the sponging-house.

"There, sire, is the paper which you demanded of me," said the Prince. "It contains the acknowledgment on a certain lady's part——"

"Which I wanted—eh?" interrupted the King "Well, well—I am glad of that—glad of that: and now Pitt will not hesitate to get your debts paid for you."

Some farther discourse took place upon this occasion, and upon that topic, between the King and the Prince: but it is unnecessary to place it upon record. We may however observe that his Majesty, after a long interview of two hours with his son, recommended that he should return to Carlton House and compose his thoughts so as to be enabled to meet the Princess of Brunswick with a smiling countenance. To this proposal the heir-apparent cheerfully assented: but instead of repairing homeward, he went and amused himself at a private billiard-table for an hour. He then drove to Carlton House, it being now two o'clock in the afternoon: and, on arriving there, he learnt from Germain that the Countess of Jersey was in one of the drawing-rooms.

"Ah! then the Princess has arrived in London?" murmured the heir-apparent, with a tightening sensation at the heart: and, throwing off his hat and cloak, he at once proceeded to the apartment where Lady Jersey was anxiously waiting to see him.

This lady, who has not been hitherto introduced to our readers, was one of the numerous mistresses of the royal voluptuary.

Her beauty was of that dark, warm, and glowing style which invests its possessor with an air of eternal youthfulness and defies the ravages both of dissipation and time. Thus even the closest observer of the phases of woman's appearance at the different stages of her life, would have been able to hazard no nearer conjecture relative to the age of Lady Jersey than that she was between thirty and forty—but whether nearer the former or the latter point, it was impossible to decide. And yet that conjecture would have been erroneous: for she was now in her forty-second year!

She was tall and exquisitely formed—a little inclined to stoutness, and yet not too much to impair the gracefulness of her movements or the elegance of her figure. Her bust was grandly developed, as was usually the case with all the Prince's favourites: but her waist was naturally delicate without the need of undue compression;—and her limbs were exquisitely modelled, so as to give grace to her attitudes and render her walk light and her bearing dignified and imposing. In her person were thus united the luxuriousness of full and glowing charms and the elegant flexibility which rendered her as brilliantly attractive in the dance as she was fitted by nature and appearance for amorous dalliance and sensuous enjoyment.

The warmth of her temperament was indeed evident in every turn and expression of her features, where a voluptuous softness was mingled with a bolder and more decided look, denoting strength of mind and an unprincipled character. But over these indications of mental power and evil passions, that languishing ardour which arose from her sen-

suous nature threw so delicious a gloss that the impression her appearance left upon the observer was that of a woman formed for love and pleasure and too indolent in her luxurious imagination to direct her thoughts to intrigues of any less tender character.

Her complexion was a clear olive, with a carnation tint of health upon the cheeks, which were plump and yet soft to the eye: the lips were of the brightest scarlet and slightly pouting, bearing the appearance of a delicious fruit in its full ripeness and with a dew upon it;—the teeth were faultlessly even, all perfect in number, and white as ivory;—the nose was aquiline and beautifully formed, with nostrils of the delicate red of the rose-leaf;—and the chin was sweetly rounded.

The neck of this splendid creature was long and arching. A gradual slope formed the broad chest, whence the bosoms rose grandly like two globes of the lightest bronze with the pinky tint of warm, glowing, living flesh. The shoulders, plump and full, had likewise their beauteous slope;—and the arms were modelled in a symmetry that could not possibly be surpassed.

Her hair, which was of darkest sable, had that gentle and scarcely perceptible undulation which denotes the fervour of the blood and the thirst for voluptuous pleasures. A rich gloss was upon it, making an alternation of light and shade with the wavy surface that was of such velvet smoothness to the touch. Her eyes were black; and they shone, in their blueish liquid whites, beneath the jetty fringes which overhung them in silken length and thickness.

Her hand was incomparably beautiful. The fingers were long and tapering; and the nails were of the fine almond shape, with the rosy tinge of vigorous health leaving the crescent, where they joined the flesh at the bottom, of pellucid whiteness. Beneath the transparent olive skin of the superb arms might be seen the faint blue tracery of the veins—those veins in which the blood ran hot and furious!

Her feet and ankles were as faultless as her hands;—and when she stood either in the dignity of her rank or in the grace of her womanhood, the eye would wander with an inexpressible feeling of delight over the flowing outlines of that form which gave just so much shapeliness to its drapery as to afford an idea of the rich contours and the symmetrical length of limb that it concealed. No—not altogether concealed: for, according to the fashion of the times, Lady Jersey wore her dress so low as to display at least all the upper half of her glowing bust, while her arms were entirely bare.

This lady had a very kind and indulgent husband who entertained not the least objection to his wife being the known and all but acknowledged mistress of the heir-apparent. Had this same Lord Jersey found her out in an intrigue with a lacquey or any other plebeian, he would instantaneously have thrust her forth in ignominy from his abode, and appealed, with all the energy of an outraged husband, to the proper tribunals for a divorce. But as it was to Royalty that his spouse thus prostituted herself, and as it was with the heir-apparent to the British throne that she became an adulteress, his lordship actually looked upon the noble lady's shame as a source of immense honour to himself!

Again, had Lady Jersey been only suspected of an intrigue with a valet, she would have been excluded from all decent society in a moment: but being the harlot of the Prince of Wales, she was courted, flattered, worshipped, and caressed, by all the members, male and female, of the world of fashion.

That she was as intriguing in other matters as she was in love, we may safely proclaim to be a fact; and that she was as dangerous as she was beautiful, and as designing as she was captivating, are truths known to all who are in the least acquainted with the history of the British Court.

Such was the syren who was now waiting to see the Prince, and who was lounging on a sofa in the drawing-room at Carlton House when his Royal Highness made his appearance on his return from the billiard-table.

"Well, what tidings, my sweet friend?" demanded the Prince impatiently, as he snatched a kiss from Lady Jersey's pouting lips.

"Her Royal Highness the Princess Caroline of Brunswick has just arrived in London," responded the fair patrician, her words flowing in a voice of rich harmony but in the measured tone which an ill-concealed spite imparted to her utterance.

"You have been with her—you have seen her—you have conversed with her," said the Prince, his manner indicating a mixture of painful suspense and excitement. "You can now, then, tell me everything—and yet I dread to ask you a single question! Oh! I am haunted with wretched, wretched presentiments concerning this marriage! But in one word, my dear Frances—in one word tell me," exclaimed the heir-apparent, with a strange abruptness of both voice and manner,—"is *she* a fit wife for *me*?"

The lady raised her countenance towards the Prince with an expression of mingled commiseration and alarm; but we need hardly say that this was an air which she assumed in order to pique his curiosity the more acutely and render his suspense the more profoundly poignant—for she was a very serpent in the aptitude of duplicity, and her guile was the more dangerous because her winning and seductive manner invested it with all the semblance of truth. Thus were her artifices rendered irresistibly insidious by the appearance of sincerity in which she clothed them; and not only was she an adept in disguising the most venomous sentiments in the most honied language, but her dupes would drink in the poison of her looks and fancy that it was a delicious balm which those eyes so full of seeming tenderness were pouring into the heart!

Thus, when she now raised her charming countenance in a half sympathising, half deprecating manner towards the Prince, as she sate upon a voluptuous sofa, and he stood in nervous trepidation before the fire,—and when he saw that look into which she threw just enough pity to startle him, and just enough apprehension to torture him with suspense,—it never for an instant struck him that all this was a mere wicked affectation on the part of Lady Jersey.

"My dearest friend," he murmured, in a tone deeply agitated, "will you answer the question which I put to you?"

"And that question?" said Lady Jersey interrogatively, as if she wished to gain time ere she gave a response.

"I demand once more," cried the Prince, now goaded almost to desperation, "whether you consider *her*—the Princess, I mean—a fit wife for me?"

"No—I do not," replied Lady Jersey, speaking as if she had only brought herself by means of a great and repugnant effort to give utterance to such a response.

"Deal candidly with me," said the Prince, in a low deep voice, as he placed himself by the side of his mistress upon the sofa. "My brother the Duke of Clarence, who saw the Princess the year before last at Brunswick, has given me a glowing account of her beauty, her amiability, and her accomplishments. Moreover, a private letter which I received from Brunswick yesterday, assures me that the Princess is altogether very pleasing in personal appearance—that her bust is good—that her teeth are fine—that her eyes are full of intelligence—that her bearing is dignified and majestic—and that her manners are characterised by sweetness, condescension, and affability. Such is the report which I have received: in an hour or two I shall be enabled to judge for myself. But do, dear Jersey—do, in the meantime, delineate the portraiture of the Princess according to the conception which you have formed—and tell me frankly, candidly, and unreservedly why you do not consider her a fitting wife for me."

"Yes—I will speak unreservedly, since you wish it, George," said that fiend-like woman who wore so angelic a shape: and as she breathed those words with a voice and manner of the utmost apparent sincerity, she allowed her delicate hand to play caressingly with the Prince's hair.

"Proceed, dearest," observed his Royal Highness, flattered by the seemingly improvised token of fondness thus bestowed upon him. "Explain to me frankly all your impressions concerning my future wife."

"And all I have heard likewise?" said her ladyship, in a tone of inquiry which seemed full of artlessness.

"Yes—and all you have heard, provided it be from good authority," added his Royal Highness. "But pray keep me not in suspense."

"I will not—because I love you, George—and I sympathise with you," returned Lady Jersey, fixing upon him a look of burning desire. "In the first place, then, I must inform you that Mrs. Aston, Lord Claremont, and myself, in pursuance of your instructions, repaired yesterday to Greenwich to receive her Royal Highness on her landing. The royal yacht did not however arrive at Greenwich from Gravesend until about ten o'clock this morning; and the Princess landed at the Hospital. Her Royal Highness was received by the Governor, who had refreshments prepared; and I was then enabled to study the appearance of the Princess with some degree of attention. Her countenance may certainly be called pretty: but it is not expessive of either softness or intelligence. Her eyes are fine, but have a bold look. Her teeth are good in front; but the back ones are decayed——"

"You do not mean *that?*" exclaimed the Prince, starting with an irrepressible feeling of disgust.

"I not only observed it when her Royal Highness laughed heartily, which she did on two or three occasions during the luncheon," said Lady Jersey; "but Mrs. Harcourt, the Bed-chamber Woman who has accompanied her Royal Highness from Brunswick, subsequently assured me that such was the fact. Indeed—if I dared mention the anecdote ——But no——"

"Tell me what is now uppermost in your mind, Frances—I insist upon it!" exclaimed the Prince, with passionate vehemence. "Nay—I even command you," he added, in a still more excited manner when he saw that her ladyship was hesitating.

"But the anecdote was told to me in strict confidence by Mrs. Harcourt," urged the syren, thus artfully goading the Prince's curiosity to an intolerable degree of poignancy.

"And you will likewise tell it to me in strict confidence," was the heir-apparent's rejoinder.

"Well, if you force me to be thus explicit, I must yield," said the designing creature, affecting to heave a profound sigh. "The truth is, then, that during the journey from Brunswick—or rather when the royal party was stopping at Osnabruck—the Princess had a decayed tooth drawn; and she sent it, wrapped up in a piece of paper, to Lord Malmesbury."*

"By God! if this were really true!" exclaimed his Royal Highness, springing from the sofa in a state of almost wild excitement.

"I have told you the anecdote, George, precisely as it was related to me," said Lady Jersey, assuming a low and mournful tone, as if she were grieved at having been compelled to repeat such a tale.

"Oh! this is too much—too much!" cried the Prince, now pacing to and fro in the greatest agitation. "Such a piece of disgusting indelicacy affords a key to the reading of the entire character of this woman whom I am expected to cherish as my wife! But I must compose myself—I must subdue my feelings——"

"Yes, you must summon all your courage and presence of mind to your aid, my well-beloved friend," said the Countess of Jersey, now approaching the Prince and taking his hand gently in both her own.

"Then you have more to tell me?" he exclaimed, suffering her to lead him back to the sofa. "And now proceed, Jersey—tell me me all—everything!" he added, as soon as they were again seated side by side.

"I was describing to you the Princess's personal appearance," resumed the artful lady. "Her hair is what may politely and flatteringly be called a light auburn: but, were it seen upon the head of a servant girl, we should plainly and undisguisedly denominate it red. Her eye-brows are very light—indeed she has scarcely any. Her nose is bold and masculine—her lips are somewhat coarse. Her stature is short—decidedly short; and her figure is common and vulgar. You will pardon me for being thus explicit, George: but as you have insisted on hearing a description of my first impressions, I am

* The Earl of Malmesbury was sent specially to Brunswick to demand the hand of the Princess Caroline on behalf of the Prince of Wales. He likewise escorted the Princess to England; and his very curious "Diaries and Correspondence" have recently been published, in four volumes, by Mr. Bentley of New Burlington Street. He was no true friend to the Princess, and was a heartless, selfish, dissipated, self-sufficient, and impertinent aristocrat. The following memorandum appears in his Diary (Vol. III, page 201):—"Princess Caroline has a tooth drawn; she sends it down to me by her page—nasty and indelicate!"

bound to give them with frankness—although in sorrow," added Lady Jersey, with every appearance of sincerity in tone, look, and manner.

"Go on—go on," exclaimed the Prince, hurriedly: "I wish you to speak frankly—I thank you for this candour. It is a proof of your love—your friendship," he continued, vainly struggling against the agitation of his feelings;—"and it is the more kind and considerate on your part, Frances, because I am now prepared for the worst—the very worst—and the crowning shock, when we meet face to face, will be the less terrible! Go on, then—go on."

"The bust of the Princess," continued the patrician *intriguante*, "is full and large: but there does not appear to be that plumpness—that firmness—which you adore so much;"—and, as she thus spoke with an affected bashfulness and in a simpering tone, she looked down at her own exuberant charms which rose so grandly from the corsage that left them half revealed.

"How cruelly I have been deceived by every one except by *you*!" cried the Prince, in a tone of exceeding bitterness. "My brother—the Princess's portrait—my own private emissary at Brunswick the—newspapers—all have represented Caroline as a beauty——"

"And do you think, dear George, that I would mislead you for a single moment?" interrupted Lady Jersey, in her softest and most insinuating tones. "Such a proceeding on my part were ridiculous: because within the next hour or two you will have met your future wife, and have had an opportunity to judge for yourself."

"Yes—yes—I believe you, my sweet friend—I believe you," murmured the Prince, not knowing how to restrain the bitter vexation which the designing woman had thus succeeded in exciting within him. "But pray resume your description—and let me be fully prepared for all that I may have to encounter."

"There is assuredly nothing elegant nor yet graceful in the figure of her Royal Highness," said Lady Jersey: and here we may perhaps as well observe that the Princess Caroline was spoken of as her *Royal*, instead of *Serene* Highness (a umpery distinction!) from the instant that she landed in England, and before her marriage with the heir-apparent took place. "As for the bearing of her Royal Highness being majestic," continued Lady Jersey, "such a statement could only be looked upon as one of those fulsome compliments which are invariably paid to royal or illustrious personages. For no individual would be so *disloyal* and no newspaper so *bold* as to proclaim the real truth," added her ladyship. "It is the grovelling, servile, and spaniel-like character of Englishmen to puff off everything royal, simply because it *is* royal. In their eyes Royalty cannot be ugly, wicked, inelegant, or disgusting. But were the same truth to be told of the Princess Caroline of Brunswick as would be spoken were she a cook or a dairy-maid, her personal appearance would be summed up in these terms:—Pretty face, but bold and impudent expression—reddish hair—large and lascivious-looking eyes—big Roman nose—coarse lips—pig's eye-brows—decaying teeth—consequently bad breath—short thick neck—large bust, but the fulness of which seems more matron-like than virginal—projecting shoulder-blades—short stature—common-looking and vulgar figure—mien anything but imposing—gait decidedly awkward."

"And such is the future Princess of Wales—aye, and the future Queen of England!" said the heir-apparent, in a slow, measured, and solemn tone, as if he were taking in at one deliberative glance all the defects that had just been enumerated and which were so well calculated to shock and disgust even a mind far less sensitive than his own. "But, by the living God!" he exclaimed, suddenly becoming passionately excited,—"she shall *never* be Queen of England! No—they may compel me to accompany her to the altar and thereby make her *Princess of Wales*—but I swear, by heaven and by hell! that she shall never be *Queen of England!*"

As he gave utterance to these mingled imprecations and asseverations, his Royal Highness again started to his feet and began to pace the room with rapid and uneven steps; while, the moment his back was turned towards her, an expression of fiend-like triumph swept over the lovely countenance of Lady Jersey.

"Have you anything more to tell me, my dear friend?" abruptly demanded the Prince, as he stopped short at the expiration of a minute, and, abandoning his agitated walk, returned to the sofa.

"I have explained my impressions relative to the personal appearance of her Royal Highness," said Lady Jersey, affecting an extreme reluctance to continue the topic: "what more can I tell you?"

"Her manners—her mind—her accomplishments," exclaimed the Prince, hurriedly: "have you nothing to say on all those points? Did you yourself receive no impressions relative thereto?—did Mrs. Harcourt vouchsafe no confidential communications?—was Malmesbury himself utterly silent? Come—I see by your looks that you are not altogether ignorant on those heads——"

"But if I have nothing cheering—nothing favourable to impart?" interrupted her ladyship, still affecting reluctance.

"At all events it will be the *truth*," was the immediate response of the Prince, who was thus drinking in with unconscious avidity all the poisoned draughts of misrepresentation and exaggeration which the artful woman poured into his soul.

"You force me into revelations and avowals which give me exquisite pain because I see that they hurt you," said her ladyship. "But since you are so obstinate, I am bound to obey. You must know, then, that while the Princess retired for a short time after luncheon, I had an opportunity of conversing with Mrs. Harcourt. It was then that she told me the anecdote concerning the extracted tooth at Osnabruck. She is a woman of keen perception—retentive memory—and gossiping disposition: she talks rapidly, and imparts a vast amount of information in an incredibly short space of time. Accordingly, I learnt that the Princess Caroline is so ignorant, she cannot write a decent hand, much less spell accurately."

"Good heavens! is this indeed possible?" exclaimed his Royal Highness, now more indignant than vexed. "Why, it is a positive insult to me—to the Royal Family—to the British nation, to have sent over such a creature to be my wife. But go on—go on: nothing will surprise me now!"

"Mrs. Harcourt informs me," resumed Lady Jersey, "that the Princess is volatile, frivolous,

and often impertinent. That she is ill-mannered, familiar, and at times utterly oblivious of her rank and station, I myself could perceive during the few hours that I have this day passed in the company of her Royal Highness. She talks indiscreetly—gives utterance to anything that comes uppermost in her mind—and frequently rattles away with a marvellous affectation of wit and humour. On such occasions, Mrs. Harcourt assures me, she will giggle in the most childish manner; and, what is worse, she of course expects that every one will smile at her bad jokes and obscure jocularities. Nor is she very particular as to the language she makes use of; and she certainly said two or three things in my presence this morning which savoured of downright indelicacy. Her Royal Highness was brought up, it is generally understood, with much severity: indeed, her own father the Duke said to Lord Malmesbury a few weeks ago at Brunswick, '*She is not a fool; but she has no discretion: she has been closely looked after—and I can assure your lordship it was necessary.*' What this could possibly mean," continued Lady Jersey, "I must leave you, my dear George, to conjecture: but very certain it is that the ideas and language of your future wife are somewhat loose, despite of the severity of her rearing."

"This is a picture well calculated to gladden me," observed the heir-apparent bitterly. "Complete it, my dear Frances—complete it, I pray you."

"Lord Malmesbury communicated to Mrs. Harcourt the opinion which the Duke of Brunswick had expressed concerning his daughter," continued the Countess of Jersey; "and dear gossiping Mrs. Harcourt has not hesitated to reveal everything to me. But would you believe it, my dear George, that the Princess is positively of dirty habits——"

"What!" ejaculated his Royal Highness, now contemplating his artful companion with dismay.

"It is as I tell you," persisted Lady Jersey, every instant growing bolder and less scrupulous in her allegations against the unfortunate Caroline of Brunswick. "Lord Malmesbury was positively compelled to remonstrate with her Royal Highness upon the slovenliness of her habits, the filth of her apparel, and the disgusting neglect of her person, which was but too evident.* He plainly

* The following extracts are from Malmesbury's work mentioned in a preceding note:—"Mademoiselle Hertzfeldt, the Duke of Brunswick's mistress, takes me aside and says nearly these words: 'I conjure you to induce the Prince of Wales to make his bride live a retired life at the commencement. She has always been kept within bounds and had a tight hand held over her; *and this was absolutely necessary.* If she finds herself altogether in the world without any restrictions she will not keep her footing sure. She has not a depraved heart—she has never done anything wrong—but her speech is always ahead of her reflection: she abandons herself heart and soul to those with whom she is conversing; and thence it follows, even in this little Court, that meanings and intentions are attribu to her which never could have been really her own. It is absolutely necessary that the Prince keeps a tight hand over her; *or she will go astray.*'" (Page 169, Vol. III.) "She has no stability; no fixed character, a light and flighty mind, but meaning well and well disposed; and my eternal theme to her is *to think before she speaks, and recollect herself.*" (Page 179.) "I regret the apparent facility of the Princess Caroline's character; her want of reflection and substance: with a *steady* man she would do vastly well, but with one of a different description *there are great risks.*" (Page 182.) "The Princess talked of her aunt the Abbess; said she had endeavoured to inspire her with a diffidence and mistrust of me—that I was a dangerous man. I tried to get rid of this sort of conversation; but the Princess stuck by it; and I was forced to say that I believed her aunt had forgotten that twenty years had elapsed since she had seen me, or heard of me; and that, besides, such an insinuation was a tacit accusation of my being very *foolishly* unprincipled. She said she meant well; that she perhaps thought too partially of me herself, and was afraid for her. It was in vain to attempt to turn the subject: she went on during the whole supper—was in high spirits, *and laughed unmercifully at her aunt and her supposed partiality for me.*" (Pages 183 and 184.) "The Duke of Brunswick takes me aside, and says that the only reason why he wished Mademoiselle Rozenwelt to be with the Princess was that his daughter *writes very ill* and *spells ill*, and he was desirous this should not appear." (Page 187.) "Mademoiselle Hertzfeldt again talks to me as before about the Princess Caroline. She must be governed by fear, *even by terror.* 'She will kick over the traces if you don't take care.'" (Page 189.) "Princess Caroline shows me an anonymous letter received from London about Lady Jersey: its object was to frighten the Princess with the idea that she would lead her into an affair of gallantry and be ready to be convenient on such an occasion. This did *not* frighten the Princess, although it did the Duke and Duchess; and on my perceiving this, I told her Lady Jersey would be more cautious than to risk such an audacious measure; and that moreover it was *death* to presume to approach a Princess of Wales, and no man would be daring enough to think of it. *She asked me whether I was in earnest.* I said such was our law; that any body who presumed to *love* her was guilty of *high treason* and punished with *death*, if she was weak enough to listen to him: so also would *she.* This startled her." (Page 189.) "Roads in good order. Princess wanted me to be in the same coach with her; I resisted it as being impossible, from its being improper. She disposed to laugh at the matter: I discountenance it." (Page 190.) "Her character could not distinguish between *giving* as a benevolence and flinging away the money like a child. She thought that the act of getting rid of the money, and not seeming to care about it, constituted the merit." (Page 192.) "Princess Caroline very awkward at cards; speaks without thinking; gets too easy; calls the ladies she never saw before, '*My love, my dear, my little one.*' I notice this and reprove it strongly. The Princess for the first time disposed to take it amiss." (Page 193.) "On summing up Princess Caroline's character to-day, it came out to my mind to be that she has quick parts, without a sound or distinguishing understanding; that she has a ready conception, but no judgment; caught by the first impression; led by the first impulse; turned away by appearances or by pleasure; loving to talk, and prone to confide and make missish friendships the last twenty-four hours. *Some natural but no acquired morality:* and no strong innate ideas of its value and necessity: warm feelings and nothing to counterbalance them great good humour and much good-nature—no appearance of caprice—rather quick and vivacious, but not a grain of rancour. From her habits, from the life she was allowed and even compelled to live, forced to dissemble; fond of gossiping; and this strengthened greatly by the example of her good mother, who is all curiosity and inquisitiveness." (Page 196.) "At supper Princess Caroline very cheerful, and pleasantly so; understands a joke and can make one." (Page 197.) "Princess Caroline affects to dislike Madame Walmoden and calls her a bore. I say she ought to ask her to play with her: she does it, but reluctantly, and during the party whispers and giggles with some of the young women. I notice this to her after, as what I could not approve." (Page 198.) "Princess Caroline very *missish* at supper to-

and openly told her that she was positively offensive on that account, and that she could not fail to disgust her future husband. Mrs Harcourt has indeed seen portions of Lord Malmesbury's *Diary* in which all these various conversations are duly recorded—doubtless to be one day published to the world."

"Oh! Frances, Frances, I am distressed beyond all power of description!" exclaimed his Royal Highness, literally writhing with the mental anguish which these shocking disclosures had naturally excited. "What am I to do?—what course can I adopt? If I refuse to receive the Princess as my wife, the Ministers will refuse to pay my debts—and these at this moment amount to six hundred thousand pounds! O my God! I already loath—detest—abominate the German wretch that has been chosen as my bride."

And covering his face with his hands, the Prince yielded to no affected nor even moderate grief. It was the first time in his life—or at least for many a year—that he had thus given way to such affliction; and its sting was fraught with an indescribable bitterness.

And now the Countess of Jersey, having worked her royal lover up to this unspeakable pitch of wretchedness, and being perfectly satisfied in her own mind that she had thoroughly disgusted him with the unfortunate Caroline of Brunswick,—no matter how different the Princess might really prove from the hideous picture thus delineated,—the Countess of Jersey, we say, began to console the heir-apparent to the best of her ability.

"Well, I must not be downcast," exclaimed the Prince at length. "My father and the Ministers may compel me to marry this German creature—but they cannot force me to love her: they may drive me to the altar to accept her hand in marriage—but they cannot constrain me to give her my heart in return. No—nor in compelling me to take a wife, can they force me to surrender up any one of my mistresses!"

"Nothing, nothing should induce *me* to forget or abandon you, my own beloved Prince," exclaimed the Countess of Jersey, flinging her arms about the neck of his Royal Highness and covering his countenance with kisses: then, throwing herself back upon the sofa, and making him recline in her arms in such a manner that his head lay pillowed upon her bosom, she said, "Repose thus with me for a few minutes, my George: it cannot be long ere the summons will arrive for you to repair to St. James's Palace to greet your bride."

"Would that the hateful ceremony were over!" exclaimed the Prince. "But, thank heaven, when once the knot is tied, you will then become a resident beneath this roof, my dearest Frances—in your capacity of Lady of the Bedchamber to her Royal Highness——"

"And supposing that the Princess should be jealous?" said the Countess, with a smile that revealed her pearly teeth.

"You will be protected by *me* against *her* anger," was the prompt reply of the royal lover. "But you have given me no details of the landing of the Princess—of the reception which you experienced at her hands——"

"Ah! I had forgotten," interrupted the Countess. "But it may all be summed up in a few words. Obedient to your instructions, Lord Claremont, Mrs. Harvey Aston, and myself proceeded to Greenwich to meet the Princess. She was overwhelmingly polite to me—I know not wherefore—but such was the fact. Lord Malmesbury, methought, treated me with a proportionate degree of coldness. For this, however, I cared little. I sate next to the Princess at the luncheon given by the Governor of the Hospital; and her Royal Highness chattered a great deal to me and Mrs. Aston. Afterwards the Princess withdrew to an apartment prepared for her, and where she chose to be alone for a short time; and in the interval I gleaned from Mrs. Harcourt the various pieces of information which I have already given you. Mrs. Aston, Mrs. Harcourt, and I were then summoned to attend upon her Royal Highness. The carriages were then ordered: Mrs. Harcourt and I accompanied the Princess—Mrs. Aston rode in the same vehicle with Lords Malmesbury and Claremont. There were very few persons assembled to witness the landing and the subsequent departure: nor did the carriages attract much observation along the road. In an hour from the moment that we left Greenwich Hospital, we alighted at St. James's Palace;—and leaving the Princess to receive such a welcome as the King, Queen, Princes, and Princesses, may think fit to give her, I pleaded indisposition and hurried away. But instead of proceeding homeward to lie down for a few hours," added the Countess, laughing, "I came hither to hold this long discourse with you."

The Prince was about to make some observation in reply, when the door was opened slowly; and Germain, who had purposely fidgetted a moment

---

night. I much fear these habits are irrecoverably rooted in her; she is naturally curious, and a gossip; she is quick and observing, and she has a silly pride in finding out everything: she thinks herself particularly acute in discovering *likings*, and this leads her at times to *the most improper remarks and conversation!*" (Page 200.) "Argument with the Princess about her toilette. She piques herself on dressing quick: I disapprove this. She maintains her point; I however desire Madame Busche to explain to her that the Prince is very delicate, and that he expects a long and very careful toilette, of which she has no idea. On the contrary, she neglects it sadly, *and is offensive from this neglect.* Madame Busche executes her commission well, and the Princess comes out the next day well washed *all over.*" (Pages 207 and 208.) "Princess out of humour. Very nonsensical confidence about Prince of Orange—cannot be committed to writing—must recollect it, as well as my answer and advice." (Page 208.) "After dinner long and serious conversation with the Princess, on her manner of calling women by their plain name—of saying '*My dear, my love,*' &c." (Page 209.) "I also took frequent opportunities of speaking very *seriously* to the Princess Caroline, on her not showing due respect to the Duchess her mother, of her sneering and slighting her." (Page 210.) "I had two conversations with the Princess Caroline. One on *the toilette*, on *cleanliness*, and on *delicacy of speaking.* On these points I endeavoured, as far as was possible for a *man*, to inculcate the necessity of great and nice attention to every part of dress, as well as to what was hid, as to what was seen. *I knew she wore coarse petticoats, coarse shifts, and thread stockings, and that these never were well washed, or changed often enough!* I observed that a long toilette was necessary, and gave her no credit for boasting that her's was a *short* one. What I could not say myself upon this point, I got said through women; through Madame Busche, and afterwards through Mrs. Harcourt. It is remarkable how amazingly on this point her education has been neglected." (Pages 211 and 212.)

or two with the handle, in order to give due warning of his approach, entered the room. The heir-apparent had therefore ample leisure to raise his head from the voluptuous pillow on which it had been reposing—while the Countess had also a moment's grace to arrange her hair which the Prince's caresses had somewhat disturbed.

"May it please your Royal Highness," said Germain, with a low bow, "their Majesties await your presence at St. James's Palace."

"A few minutes' attention to my toilette, and I obey the summons, Germain," exclaimed the Prince.

The Countess of Jersey then took her departure; and his Royal Highness hurried to his own chamber, where he speedily made such changes in his apparel as he thought fit.

It was about four o'clock in the afternoon of this memorable day that the Prince of Wales entered his state-carriage and drove to St. James's Palace close by, to meet for the first time the fated and fore-doomed Caroline of Brunswick!

CHAPTER CLXXV.

A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

RETURN we now to that chamber in Whitechapel Workhouse where, at the close of a recent chapter, we left the parish-surgeon alone with his patient, James Melmoth.

The morning, which had broken amidst such unseasonable gloom, was now brightening up, as we have already described the gladdening change at the moment when the Amazon was looking forth from the sponging-house window in Chancery Lane: but the sunbeams which now penetrated into the pauper infirmary in Whitechapel, only seemed to mock and not to cheer the wretched aspect of the place.

Grim and wan in its sickliness was the expression of Melmoth's countenance, as those beams played thereon through the windows which were curtained with naught save the dinginess of their own dirt;—and yet the unhappy man smiled faintly—for the thought struck him at the moment how delightful it would be to roam in the open fields, and breathe the pure air of heaven instead of the fetid atmosphere of those foul infirmary-rooms, and listen to the singing of birds instead of the complaints of neglected paupers and the growling of surly nurses.

"You feel better, my good man?" said the surgeon, as he observed that sickly smile into which the invalid's features had for a moment relaxed.

"Yes—somewhat better, sir," replied Melmoth. "I am glad that I have found my children—although we met under circumstances so dreadful—so very, very dreadful!"

"What do you mean by dreadful circumstances?" asked the surgeon, seating himself on the edge of the bed and contemplating the invalid with a profound attention. "I can understand that the meeting was painful—but to be dreadful——"

"Oh! do not question me, sir,—do not question me!" exclaimed Melmoth, a frenzied expression suddenly sweeping over his countenance. "You will only wrest from me the most horrible of secrets—for they are already trembling at the tip of my tongue. Had you treated me harshly, I should have felt no inclination to tell you anything: but you have looked—you have spoken—you have acted kindly towards me, and I am inspired with an ardent longing to unbosom to your ears all the tremendous mysteries which are now entombed in my soul as a corpse in its sepulchre! But do not question me, I say—do not question me," cried the invalid, his whole form quivering with a dreadful spasm. "Although my inclination prompts me in one sense to make a confidant of you—yet in another, do I shrink with indescribable horror from the bare idea! And to tell you the truth," added the man, his voice now sinking to a low hollow whisper, which sounded like the wintry breeze through a leafless tree,—"there are times when I fancy that I have *two minds*—two minds, separate and distinct—one urging me in *this* direction, and the other in *that*."

And as Melmoth made the strange revelation in a tone of mysterious confidence, he gazed up into the surgeon's countenance with a look wherein the wildness of insanity and the mournfulness of a sad condition of self-knowledge were ominously blended.

We have already stated that the medical man was devoted to his profession and that he worshipped the art with as much enthusiasm as the most ardent lover could possibly experience towards his mistress. Such a peculiar case as that which he had evidently now before him, was not therefore likely to be neglected or overlooked by such an earnest inquirer into the depths and mysteries of the medical world: indeed the surgeon had previously observed particular symptoms leading him to suspect that this was one of those examples of psychological eccentricity into which it was highly important to examine.

"My good friend," he accordingly said, in a soothing tone and with encouraging manner, "I am incapable of abusing any amount of confidence which you may feel disposed to place in me. A medical practitioner must observe good faith in that respect as implicitly as if he were a father-confessor. You tell me that you experience the effects of two separate inclinations, urging you in different directions——"

"Yes—it is so," ejaculated Melmoth, abruptly. "At this very moment, I am the prey to a species of excruciating anxiety, prompting me to unbosom myself entirely to you—while on the other hand I feel that I would sooner perish the most wretched of deaths than betray the appalling secrets which I cherish *here—here!*"

And the invalid beat his breast violently as he uttered these last words.

"Will you not look upon me as a friend?" inquired the surgeon softly.

"Yes—yes—I must!" murmured James Melmoth, with accents of feverish impatience: then, suddenly clutching the arm of the medical man and gazing up with a kind of wild earnestness into his countenance, he said in a deep sepulchral tone, "Strange things occurred to me last night! But stoop down your head—lower—lower still! They must not overhear me in the next room. There! keep your head bent like that, and I can whisper in your ear!"

The surgeon glanced with a momentary feeling of affright at the face of the invalid as he stooped

THE PRINCESS CAROLINE OF BRUNSWICK.

his head in the manner desired: for Melmoth's countenance had suddenly become pale and livid—frenzy was now expressed in his glaring eye-balls—and his whole appearance was that of a maniac about to burst forth into all the terrific violence of a rabid fury. But stifling that sentiment of alarm with which so awful a spectacle for an instant inspired him, the medical man placed himself in the position most convenient to catch anything that the invalid might murmuringly breathe in his ear.

"The darkness was thick and tangible last night," Melmoth resumed with startling abruptness, "as I rose from my pallet and looked forth from the window. Yes—I looked forth, despite of that pitchy blackness which filled the air; and my eyes could penetrate the dense atmosphere of night as if my glances were lightnings piercing through it. And it seemed as if there were a feeble glimmering that began to appear amidst that gloom a long way off: and this glimmering gradually grew brighter and brighter, until a churchyard, bathed in moonlight, stood out from amidst the utter darkness that still enveloped all besides. It was the scene of cold silvery lustre viewed on the opposite bank of a river of ink—a strange picture beheld through the medium of an atmosphere black as pitch! But, Ah! what did I see in that churchyard?" demanded Melmoth, a strange spasm for a moment convulsing his features, as his fingers tightened with spasmodic violence in their grasp upon the surgeon's arm. "'Twas myself—my own self—lying asleep by the side of a grave—aye, and near a coffin which had been dragged up from that grave—yes, and nigh also to the loathsome corpse torn forth from that coffin. And then methought my mind was transfused from *myself* into that *image of myself* which lay sleeping in the moon-lit churchyard: in other words, it seemed as if I lost my own identity as I stood at the window of this

workhouse room, and became changed into the being that was pillowed upon the wormy soil up-cast from the yawning grave close by. And I began to *think* with the mind of that sleeping counterpart of myself—and I began to *see* also with his eyes. For presently the deep, deep silence of the churchyard was broken by the low rustling of the garments of the grave: and hideous shapes began to glide through the moon-lit air. Oh! it was horrible—horrible!—for the cemetery was giving up its dead to render the night appalling—and the spectres of the departed were mingling *then* in death as never had they mingled in life! The pampered son of luxury and the occupant of the pauper's grave were close together there: the wealthy tradesman's wife, who had died of a surfeit, and the lank form of the needlewoman, done to death by famine and cold in one of the long, long nights of winter, were next to each other now! And there were the ghastly shapes of men and women who had been hanged, with the halters round their necks, and following the spectre of the hangman as he bore the accursed gibbet at the head of this awful group. Oh! it was horrible—horrible—and I saw it all! I heard the rustling of the winding-sheets as the ghastly multitude mustered in death's array and proceeded through the churchyard—over the graves and amidst the tombs, glidingly—glidingly! Yes—and I beheld their eyes gaze on me with stony glare as they passed by the spot where I lay entranced—or rather where lay that mysterious and supernatural image of myself. I could distinguish those who had been interred a long time and had almost changed into the earth to which they were consigned, from those who had only been buried recently. For the former were loathsome with corruption and rottenness—while the latter had all the marble appearance of fresh corpses. With the former there were eyeless sockets—nose fallen in—lips drawn away from the teeth, which were thus left grinning horribly—the flesh rotting and discoloured—the shroud in rags! With the latter there were the regular outlines of feature—the dull, fixed, stony gaze—the passionless tranquillity of countenance—the lips colourless as the cheeks, but covering the teeth—the under-jaw held up by the white bandage—and the clean dry winding-sheet! Yes—I saw all this—I marked all this—my memory received an impress of all those details, as indelibly as if seared upon the brain by a red-hot iron! And then methought that I sprang suddenly from the spot where I had been lying in a profound sleep—that I seized upon one of those spectral shapes floating past me—that I felt its shroud rustling in the grasp of my right hand, and its flesh cold as ice to the touch of my left—that it slowly turned its marble countenance and bent its stony gaze upon me—that I felt its breath, cold, cold as wintry air upon my cheek—and that I recognised its features——O God! the features of my own wife!"

Melmoth now fell back with a hollow moan, and, closing his eyes, lay like one dead!

The surgeon was alarmed—no, not alarmed exactly; for he was too much accustomed to see paupers die, to be *able* to care much about it: but he felt vexed at the idea that the present poor wretch might pass away before he should have wormed from him the clue to that morbid condition of mind whereof he had given such astounding proofs by the narrative of a dream which he had looked upon as a fact.

But on feeling Melmoth's pulse and placing a hand upon his heart, the surgeon discovered that life was not extinct; and he hastened to apply the usual restoratives. In a few minutes the patient recovered his senses, but was too much exhausted to speak: the surgeon accordingly administered some medicine the effect of which was shortly to lull him into a gentle repose—and the medical man then quitted the infirmary, with an intimation to the nurse that he should return in the afternoon.

Now it happened that this surgeon was intimately acquainted with Mr. Thurston, in whose medical knowledge and psychological information he placed the utmost confidence. He accordingly repaired direct to the West End of the town—called in May Fair—and communicated to Mr. Thurston the fact that there was at the present moment a very extraordinary case of mental hallucination in Whitechapel poor-house. He entered into details; and the curiosity of Mr. Thurston was so excited, that he readily consented to accompany his friend to the eastern district of the metropolis and see the "curious patient." Luncheon was however served up first—and moreover Mr. Thurston had a few visits to pay in the neighbourhood;—and then there were some recently acquired objects of interest to show in the surgery,—such as a wen, as large as a Dutch cheese, taken off a man's head and preserved in a jar—an eye that was removed from its socket, the patient having received a blow thereon which had produced cancer—and the body of an infant which had been overlain in the parish workhouse. The luncheon being disposed of—the visits paid—and the curiosities duly inspected—Mr. Thurston's one-horse chaise was ordered round to the door; and it was about half-past three in the afternoon when the two medical gentlemen alighted at the gate of Whitechapel workhouse.

The surgeon of the establishment led the way direct to the infirmary, followed by Mr. Thurston; and as they passed through the larger room of which mention has already been made, the former gentleman pointed to a group of three children, whispering at the same time to his friend, "Those two boys and that girl belong to the patient we are about to visit."

"Ah! poor devils," said Thurston, carelessly: "they look thin and pale enough."

"You should have seen them this morning—before they put on the clothes they are wearing now," observed the parish doctor, still speaking in a low tone;—"they were positively horrible to gaze upon! But these things can't be helped, I suppose," he added, as he turned and led the way into the wretched crib where Melmoth was lying.

"There! do you see that gentleman along with the doctor of this place?" suddenly whispered the eldest of the three children, as he caught each of the other two with nervous violence, by the arm. "Look—I mean that gentleman who is just following the doctor into father's room. Ah! he is the wicked, unkind, heartless man who took away poor baby's body and

would not let it be buried," added young Melmoth, speaking in the lowest possible tone to his little brother and sister, while the tears ran down his emaciated countenance.

The boy and girl to whom he made that communication, wept likewise, although they were too young to understand it altogether; and thus the poor children mingled their tears and their sobs with as much feeling as could possibly be experienced by the offspring of a Duke and Duchess.

Meantime the workhouse doctor and Mr. Thurston had entered the room where Melmoth was lying.

The invalid had slept for a few hours since the surgeon was with him in the morning; and he had awakened considerably refreshed. This assurance he now gave, when asked in the usual manner how he felt.

"And your mind, my good fellow—your mind?" said the workhouse surgeon, stooping down and whispering in Melmoth's ear. "You need not be afraid to speak in the presence of that gentleman who has accompanied me: he is an intimate friend—a brother professional——"

"Come to see us pauper patients out of curiosity, I suppose?" interrupted Melmoth, somewhat sternly. "Is it not so?"

"The interest which a medical practitioner takes in cases properly belonging to the sphere of his own profession, cannot be looked upon as a mere idle curiosity," said the surgeon.

"Well, sir—I think you are right there," observed Melmoth, after a few moments' reflection. "But you have not mentioned to him anything of those wild vagaries which I poured into your ears this morning, I hope?" added the invalid, in a whisper so low and timid that it was scarcely audible.

"Do you think I would betray your confidence?" asked the surgeon, with the well-assumed air of sincerity unjustly suspected. "But my friend will consider it strange that I should continue thus to talk to you in whispers. This poor man," he exclaimed aloud, turning at the same time towards Thurston, "is a patient in whom I take great interest."

"Indeed!" observed the May Fair practitioner. "Is there anything peculiar in his case?" he inquired, with the tone and manner of one who had received no previous information on the subject.

"Badly wounded—in numerous places—wonderful how he escaped with his life," responded the workhouse surgeon.

"How were the wounds caused?" asked Thurston.

"The poor man was passing through a field where some cockneys were shooting," replied the surgeon; "and he received in his own body the contents of the fowling-pieces of those awkward sportsmen."

"Small shot, I suppose?" said Thurston, inquiringly.

"Egad! they were such shot as you would not like to penetrate *your* skin, my dear friend," exclaimed the workhouse surgeon: "nor would you style them small, I think. In fact, two slugs had lodged in the calf of the right leg of the poor fellow—and a crooked nail was sticking in the left——"

"But surely sportsmen do not use such materials?" cried Thurston.

"I know nothing about it," responded the workhouse surgeon. "I never was out shooting in my life—and never wish to go. Duck-shot and swan-shot are like cabalistic characters to me;—and I should not even have known that the things which I extracted were called slugs, had not a pauper-invalid in the next room told me so. But here they are."

And the medical gentleman produced them from his pocket.

"I beg your pardon," gasped Melmoth, on whom a violent agitation had been rapidly stealing during the colloquy just recorded;—"but really, gentlemen—this discourse of yours——"

"Calm yourself, my good friend," said the workhouse surgeon: "we did not mean to distress you. Indeed, we could not possibly conceive that our remarks were calculated to annoy you."

"This is extraordinary—most extraordinary!" murmured Mr. Thurston, as he inspected the slugs which his friend had put into his hand.

"Extraordinary indeed!" echoed the latter, but now likewise speaking in a subdued tone. "And you will agree with me that the whole case is more extraordinary still, when I assure you that the poor wretch has received not less than thirty wounds—and yet he escaped with his life!"

"Extraordinary!" repeated Thurston: "yes—marvellous—miraculous! But, gracious God!" he suddenly exclaimed aloud, unable to control the feelings with which he was all in a moment inspired by the idea that now struck him.

"What—what do you mean?" gasped forth Melmoth, raising himself up to a sitting posture with the sudden strength of a poignant convulsion.

The two medical men simultaneously flung their looks upon him; and they actually recoiled from the ghastly horror which was depicted upon his countenance.

"Heavens! what ails you?" cried the workhouse surgeon; for having neither caught nor understood the suspicion which had just flashed to the mind of Thurston, he could conceive no other reason for Melmoth's sudden excitement and dreadful aspect than that the unfortunate man was passing rapidly into a wild phase of insanity.

"What ails him?" repeated Thurston, shuddering all over: "do you ask what ails him? Thirty wounds in different parts of his body—missiles of different descriptions extracted from his flesh—— Ah! the reading of the mystery is no longer difficult—and we have before us the monster in human shape——"

"O God! have mercy upon me!" groaned Melmoth, sinking back upon his bolster.

"For heaven's sake explain yourself!" cried the workhouse surgeon, clutching Thurston violently by the arm. "You have raised my curiosity to an intolerable pitch——"

"Is it possible that you never read the newspapers?" interrupted the May Fair practitioner, his countenance expressing a horror almost as intense as that of the wretched man who lay gasping convulsively in the miserable pallet. "Know you not," continued Thurston, drawing his friend forcibly aside, "that for some time past a fiend in human shape has been rifling the last homes of the dead——"

"Holy God! yes—I remember now that I have both heard and read of these atrocities," interrupted the workhouse surgeon, a deadly pallor overspreading his features: "but I looked upon them as immense exaggerations—if not as downright inventions——"

"No—no: they were solemn truths!" murmured Thurston, whose usually cold and imperturbable manner had become changed into the shuddering agitation of a horrible excitement. "And the journals the other morning reported how a cemetery was violated in the dead of night—how the spring-gun placed in that churchyard exploded—how the monster must have been dangerously wounded——"

"Ah! my God!—then this unhappy being is the wretched monomaniac who has perpetrated those horrors!" exclaimed the workhouse surgeon, pointing in mingled disgust and pity towards the couch.

"'Tis true!—'tis true!" cried Melmoth, whose ears had caught the words last uttered: then covering his face with his hands, he exclaimed in a rending tone, "Kill me—kill me, I beseech you: but do not—oh! do not betray my horrible secret to the world! For the sake of my poor children, do not—I beg and implore you!"

"What in heaven's name shall we do with him, Thurston?" demanded the workhouse surgeon, in a low tone which was rendered tremulous with dread horror.

"Thurston!—who said Thurston?" suddenly yelled forth the invalid, springing up in his couch as if it were a corpse that was galvanised—so hideous was his aspect, and so fearful were the workings of his ghastly countenance. "Who mentioned the name of Thurston?" he demanded again and in a tone of the wildest excitement, his eyes glaring like those of a famished wolf.

"My name is Thurston," said the May Fair practitioner, the horror and loathing which he experienced towards the monster-man being somewhat absorbed for the instant by the curiosity which this sudden turn in the proceedings had excited.

"Then give me up the body of my babe!" yelled forth the now almost rabid Melmoth: and, in the furious endeavour which he made to spring from the bed in order to attack the surgeon, he fell precipitately on the hard floor.

The violence of the concussion deprived him of his senses: but when he awoke to consciousness again, he was in utter darkness. For a few minutes he lay perfectly still, collecting his thoughts as well as he was able: and slowly, slowly—like the waves of a long swell flowing in one after the other when the hurricane has passed over the surface of the ocean—did the tide of memory roll in upon the brain of the monster-man. And soon the rush of recollections became more rapid, more painful, and more intolerably poignant,—until the surges of memory boiled high and furious; and his whole being appeared to be tossed upon the wild tempest of his whirling, soaring, dreadful, goading thoughts.

At length, in obedience to an impulse which prompted him to ascertain where he was, he endeavoured to stretch forth his arms to *feel* through the utter darkness in which he was entombed: but no—he was powerless—motionless!

He felt that he lay like a statue, unable to move a limb. Nevertheless, his sensations told him that he was in a *bed*—and not in a *coffin*, as he had for an instant dreaded. But was he under the influence of a hideous nightmare which held him bound hand and foot? No; for he could just raise his head an inch or two from the bolster by the spontaneous motion of the neck; and he was assuredly awake—for he could now think of all kinds of subjects—he could direct his ideas into whatever channel he chose—and therefore was it beyond all doubt that he was *not* asleep.

But was he, then, in a trance? No: for he could impart a slight motion at will to his entire frame. His limbs were not held powerless by paralysis: they seemed as if held in the bondage of a tight-fitting vesture, the legs of the trousers being fastened to the mattress and the sleeves of the jacket sown to the sides of that garment itself.

Ah! a light suddenly flashed into unto his brain: he was a lunatic—or at all events treated as one;—and the accursed strait-waistcoat was upon him!

CHAPTER CLXXVI.

THE GERMAN PRINCESS.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon of that memorable day—and in a splendidly furnished apartment at Saint James's Palace, sate the Princess Caroline of Brunswick. At a short distance stood an elderly gentleman, with a patrician air and in a full Court costume, and whose eyes were fixed with an appearance of profound respect upon her Royal Highness as she addressed her observations to him. No other persons were present at the time in that saloon—no ladies-in-waiting, no courtiers, no pages; the Princess and her elderly companion were alone together—for the arrival of the Prince of Wales was now expected every moment.

Let us pause for a few minutes to give the reader the true portraiture of the Princess Caroline of Brunswick;—and the result will show that if she were not quite so fascinating as the private emissary of the heir-apparent had depicted in his correspondence from Germany, she was at all events very far from being the disgusting creature which the vile, profligate, and unprincipled Countess of Jersey had chosen to represent.

The Princess was twenty-five years of age, and rather pretty than handsome. Her countenance expressed a girlish affability and artlessness mingled with the sweetest good-humour; and it was evident, by the reading of every lineament of her face, that had she been born a peasant instead of a princess, she would have been the happiest, most joyous, unaffected, and loveable being that ever tripped over meadow or gathered early violets. It was impossible to gaze upon her for a minute without feeling a sorrowful conviction that the hoyden gladness and innocent gaiety of the natural mind had been warped, circumscribed, and modelled as it were by the artificial ceremonies and formal observances of a Court.

Her hair was of a light auburn, luxuriant, and glossy; and when worn in simple bands or in ringlets, without decoration, it was of itself as becoming an adornment as the most proudly-born could possibly display or as the fairest of the sex could own. The eyes of the Princess were not too large, nor were they bold in expression: they were handsome eyes—of a fine blue—and reflecting all the goodness of temper and generosity of heart which, being the natural characteristics of the Princess, had survived the contamination of those cold, hollow, and insincere manners and habits that sur-

rounded her at her father's Court. At times the expression of those eyes could become melting and tender,—but with a soft and delicate voluptuousness, and not with a coarse and meretricious licentiousness. Her eye-brows were not broadly defined: but they were sufficiently marked to prevent the general portraiture from being spoilt by any positive deficiency on that score.

Her lips were somewhat full—of a lively red—and with a dewy moisture constantly upon them. There was something luscious in their appearance; and while slightly pouting, they were far from coarse. The expression of the mouth would have been perhaps sensuous, had not a smile of the most fascinating amiability been constantly playing upon it,—at times scarcely perceptible, though still lingering in girlish coyness there—at others more expansive in its unaffected sweetness and winning attraction. Then the teeth were as white, and as perfect, and as pure as two strings of pearls; and the breath was as fragrant as that of the early Spring zephyr passing over the parterres of nascent flowers.

Her neck was not actually short, but wanted the graceful arching to render it beautiful and the statuesque carriage to make it dignified. Its delicate fairness was however a counterbalance for the deficiencies just mentioned;—and then the bust of the Princess was superb beyond the cavil of an honest and impartial criticism. The bosoms were full—plump—well divided—and of stainless whiteness,—rich in the mature luxuriance of womanhood's grandest charm, but not protuberant enough to be pronounced matron-like. On the contrary, the whole aspect of the Princess wore an air of virgin freshness and wholesome health which contrasted favourably and strikingly with the appearance of some of the pale, sickly, and faded beauties of the English fashionable world,—beauties that "came out" at sixteen and lost all their bloom in the dissipation of four or five London winters—thus looking already old, and certainly *passée* at one-and-twenty! But here was this Princess of four years elder still, retaining all the first freshness of youth unimpaired—with a natural glow upon her cheeks—a willowy elasticity of form—and a complexion that was capable of standing the test of daylight after having been pronounced lovely in the gorgeous saloons flooded with lustre.

The Princess was of middling stature—but of sufficient height for real womanly dignity. But in that stiffness and starchness which make Courtiers and Court ladies resemble animated statues, her Royal Highness was certainly deficient. All her motions and attitudes were accompanied with the unstudied grace so charmingly characteristic of childhood: the tutelage of a Court Master of the Ceremonies and the lessons of the dancing-master were never apparent in the carriage, gait, and movements of Caroline of Brunswick. And in unison with this natural ease which thus adhered to her, and which rendered her manners as bewitching as her disposition was gay, her clear soft voice sounded harmoniously and joyously as the melody of a May morning when all nature is putting up its hymn of thanksgiving and exultation to the almighty Creator,—that hymn which is conveyed in the song of the bird, the hum of the insect, the rustling of the leaves, and the rippling of the silver stream!

Joyous in its sweet and expressive music was that voice, the accents of which imparted tenderness to her own sonorous native language, or set forth all the harmonious cadences of that charming French tongue in which she loved to shape and give utterance to her thoughts.

The figure of the Princess was graceful and symmetrical: her hands and feet were small—her ankles well turned. Though scrupulously cleanly and nice in her person, she detested the frippery of gorgeous apparel and delighted in plain attire. Having no ambition as a princess and no vanity as a woman, she remained as true to her own ingenuous, unsophisticated, and artless nature as the training she had experienced would permit. She was in all respects a true-hearted, well-meaning, and amiable creature—one who would have shone with all the decorations of domestic virtues had she been placed in a humbler sphere, and whom it was a sin and a cruelty to shackle with the ice-chains of Courtly ceremony and restrain with the galling manacles of fashionable formalities. A cottage and not a throne should have been her portion: a worthy and unambitious man and not a prince should have been her partner in this life. In her nature were all the noblest elements of woman's character—in her disposition were all the most amiable features and in her manners all the most endearing traits that can possibly adorn her sex!

Such was the Princess Caroline of Brunswick.

And now we find her decked out in the costliest apparel—with plumage waving over her brow and diamonds shining upon her hair—with the purest pearls around her still whiter neck and more stainless bosom—and attended by a courtier the prim stiffness and habitual starchness of whose appearance and manner constituted as it were an additional chain to imprison her mind within the sphere of cold formality and solemn ceremoniousness.

Nevertheless—though she felt ill at ease and was naturally in a flutter of suspense and anxiety to behold the man whom she was to receive as a husband—she could not restrain herself from conversing with the unaffected frankness that was habitual to her.

"I regret that your Royal Highness should not have been more favourably impressed with the manner and bearing of her most gracious Majesty," said the courtier, in comment upon one of the remarks which the Princess had just made.

"Well, my dear Lord Malmesbury," exclaimed Caroline, with a smile of ill-subdued archness, "you will yourself admit the appearance of such a stately dame, so prim and awe-inspiring——"

"May it please your Royal Highness," interrupted the Earl of Malmesbury, with a slow, measured, and ceremonial bow,—"I am bound to hint to your Royal Highness in the most respectful manner in the world, and yet with a profound seriousness, upon the inconvenience—I will not say impropriety—of applying the word *dear* to me. And however great the honour——"

"Oh! pray do not tease me now with a homily, my lord," cried the Princess, somewhat pettishly: then, immediately afterwards bursting into a merry laugh, she said in her joyous tones, "But where can the harm possibly be—since your lordship is quite old enough to be my father?"

"This observation in itself savours of an inconsiderateness which I should denominate rudeness

on the part of any one save her Royal Highness," observed the Earl of Malmesbury, with another low and measured salutation.

"Are you offended, my lord?" asked Caroline, with an air of unfeigned concern. "If so, I implore your pardon—for I would not give you pain for all the world. You have been very good to me—bestowing upon me the best possible advice: and although I scarcely recollect at this moment a single point you have so strenuously laboured to impress upon me——"

"What! is it possible that I understand your Royal Highness correctly?" exclaimed the Earl of Malmesbury, lifting up his hands and raising his eyes in mingled horror and astonishment. "Now that your Royal Highness is touching upon the critical moment—that moment for which I so earnestly, anxiously, and honestly strove to prepare the mind of your Royal Highness——"

"Well, my dear Lord Malmesbury—my lord, I mean," cried the Princess, hastily correcting herself,—"suppose I assure you that I have retained in my memory all the valuable advice your lordship has given me—will that satisfy you?"

"I am afraid your Royal Highness would be insincere in making such a statement after the preceding avowal," said the courtier, with a deep gravity alike of tone and manner.

"I know that I am a giddy foolish creature at times, my good friend," proceeded the Princess, in the same rattling chatter-box tone as before: "but you must pardon me if I frankly confess that you have altogether bewildered me with the numerous pieces of advice you have given me on different occasions. My memory is like a sieve in that respect. Heigho! I wish I was at Brunswick tying up my plants and feeding my birds!"

"Your Royal Highness is guilty of a great indiscretion in expressing such a sentiment aloud—at the very moment when his Royal Highness may be approaching the door," said the Earl, in a tone of solemn remonstrance.

"But if he does not hear me, there is no harm in saying what I think?" cried the Princess, with a look so sweetly deprecatory of the nobleman's displeasure that had he not been a heartless courtier—a mere automaton capable of only just so much mechanical action and feeling as form and ceremony allowed—he would have returned the kindest answer and in the most paternal spirit to the observation of that ingenuous, candid, and unsophisticated being.

"Your Royal Highness must only say what you think when it is consistent with the strict rules of etiquette," was the cold and worldly remark which struck upon the Princess like an ice-wind pouring into a warm room through a suddenly opened casement.

"But I presume I may *think* what I choose," said Caroline.

"It would be better not, your Royal Highness," responded the courtier.

"How! are not our thoughts our own in this country?" cried the Princess in amazement.

"Assuredly not," answered the Earl. "We must *think* as well as *act* according to fashion: nay—we must even *look* and *move* according to the same rigid rule—and as for our conversation——"

"Oh! then my father's Court is actually more liberal than your vaunted English one?" exclaimed the Princess, on whose spirits a sudden damp had been thrown by this conversation.

"The Court of His Majesty my gracious Sovereign is the most particular, the best conducted, and the purest with regard to morals, in all the world," observed Lord Malmesbury, enunciating his opinions with as much dogmatic sententiousness as if he were proclaiming axioms.

"But with all those qualifications a terrible tyranny may be blended," said the Princess; "and really your code of etiquette strikes me as being particularly severe. It converts human beings into mere machines."

"So they are in the presence of kings," observed the Earl.

"It checks all the natural gush of pure and honest feelings," continued her Royal Highness.

"There must be no feeling save that of loyalty at Court," said Malmesbury.

"It engenders selfishness and heartlessness," added Caroline.

"Hearts are not known within this sphere," rejoined the courtier.

"Upon my word, I begin to think you are quite correct," exclaimed her Royal Highness drily, as she threw herself back in the chair and stretched out her feet towards the fire.

"May I humbly and respectfully observe," said the Earl, "that the attitude which your Royal Highness has just assumed would not be pleasing to the Prince were he to notice it."

"Why not?" demanded Caroline. "My feet are cold—and I warm them."

"But your Royal Highness must not have cold feet," replied Malmesbury.

"How on earth am I to prevent it?" exclaimed the Princess, pettishly.

"I cannot say. All I can point out to your Royal Highness is that it is inconsistent with etiquette," was the dogmatic response.

"At every turn I am encountered by the word *etiquette!*" cried the Princess.

"And your Royal Highness must never forget to measure every syllable you speak, every mouthful you eat, every step you take, every attitude you assume, every look you cast, and every letter you write, by the standard of etiquette."

"That is to say," observed Caroline, bitterly, "I am henceforth to look upon my existence as being confined to one abode of sensations—and even these I dare not conjure up for myself, but must take them as they are chosen for me. I have heard of the Roman vestals being immured in living tombs when they happened to go astray——"

"An unmarried lady should know nothing of women going astray," interrupted Lord Malmesbury, accompanying the objurgatory comment with the wonted grave salutation.

"But every lady who has arrived at years of discretion—whether married or unmarried—is aware that errors and faults of that kind *do* exist," exclaimed Caroline; "and it would be a wretched affectation to pretend ignorance on that point. For my part I never do."

"Your Royal Highness has too much candour in your disposition," said Malmesbury, with an accent of grave rebuke.

"Too much candour! But is not candour a virtue?"

"Assuredly, your Royal Highness. And yet——"

"Then how can I have too much of any virtue?"

"Virtues are often inconsistent with the etiquette of Courts and high life," observed Malmesbury.

"But in proportion as we divest ourselves of virtues, we must naturally assume vices in their place," exclaimed the Princess.

"The conventional laws of etiquette stamp vices *as* virtues in such cases," rejoined Malmesbury.

"Then, in a word, I am expected to throw off my natural skin and assume an artificial one altogether?" said Caroline.

"May I be permitted to observe that the allusion to your Royal Highness's——I really cannot repeat the word——savoured of indelicacy?" remarked the courtier, with many deprecatory bows and much shame-faced hesitation.

"Allusion to what, in heaven's name?" demanded Caroline, in perfect amazement. "Who made the allusion?"

"Your Royal Highness," was the response.

"And to what did I allude, then?"

"It is impossible—quite impossible——Oh! no—I could not think of repeating——"

"Then how am I to know another time?"

"True!" ejaculated Malmesbury. "And for that reason I must explain myself. Your Royal Highness spoke of your Royal Highness's—ahem!—your Royal Highness's—skin!"

And his lordship gave a great gasp, as if it were with an exhausting effort that he had brought himself to utter so dreadful a word;—while the Princess, after staring at him for nearly a minute in order to ascertain whether he could possibly be serious, threw herself back in her chair and yielded to a fit of such hearty laughter that the joyous peals might have been heard, and very likely were, in the adjacent rooms.

The Earl of Malmesbury was now perfectly aghast. This laughter was, in his estimation, most vulgar—most commonplace—most plebeian—most indecent. The Prince might arrive at any moment;—and what would *he* think of a royal lady who could still be as merry as a school-girl? The thing was altogether preposterous: it was intolerable—and Lord Malmesbury ventured to approach the Princess and stand before her, making six or seven consecutive bows full of ominous meaning.

"Well—what is wrong now?" demanded the hilarious Princess, with the tears running down those cheeks on which the usual bloom was now heightened into a perfect glow by the enthusiasm of her merriment. "What is wrong now, my lord?"

"That laughter, may it please your Royal Highness," was the response.

"What! would you have me laugh on the other side of my mouth?" exclaimed Caroline, wiping the tears from her eyes.

"Permit me to observe that the phrase '*Laugh on the other side of the mouth*,' is not by any means a pretty one," said the Earl. "It savours of the nursery."

"Ah! would to heaven I were yet there—and that I had never grown up to leave it!" exclaimed the Princess, in a tone of deep feeling, as a presentiment of approaching evil suddenly struck like a chill to her heart. "But let us go back to the opening topic of our conversation," she said, after a few moments' profound pause. "You were asking me how I liked the reception which I experienced at the hands of the Royal Family? I will answer you frankly. The King was warm and cordial towards me: but there was something so singular in his look that I really fancied he was going crazy again."

"Your Royal Highness!" ejaculated Malmesbury, throwing up his arms in a perfect consternation. "It is almost as bad as treason to give utterance to such dreadful words."

"What! is the truth treason in England?" inquired the Princess, with the most unaffected ingenuousness. "I thought that you Englishmen boasted of your freedom and your glorious Constitution: but I have not been many hours in your country without hearing quite enough to convince me that your vaunted liberty is all nonsense."

"May I beseech your Royal Highness?" exclaimed the Earl, glancing with intense uneasiness towards the door.

"Suppose the Prince did come in at this moment," said Caroline, "he would not be angry with me for expressing such an opinion as that which I have just enunciated. But I will return to the topic whence your interjected remonstrance led me aside. Well, then, the King received me warmly and cordially—the Queen with a manner which might have been stately courtesy, but which assuredly appeared to me to be a studied coldness. However, I care nothing at all for her or her humours——"

"Good heavens! your Royal Highness speaks thus of the Queen?" ejaculated Malmesbury, turning up the whites of his eyes.

"And wherefore not?" demanded Caroline. "My aunt the Princess-Abbess one day at Brunswick whispered in my ear that the Queen of England was known as '*Old Snuffy Charlotte!*'"

"God forgive me for being the listener to such treason!" murmured the Earl of Malmesbury, his countenance now elongating to a degree which could not have been exceeded were he about to be hanged.

"As for the Princesses Sophia and Amelia," continued Caroline, without stopping to take much notice of the prim courtier's distress at her observations,—"they are nice, unassuming, amiable young women—and I am certain we shall get on famously together. They are very handsome, too—and splendid figures: but both of them look as if they were married—or ought to be. They have a certain matronly air about them——"

"Such observations, may it please your Royal Highness, are decidedly improper," interrupted the Earl of Malmesbury.

"Nothing pleases your lordship," said Caroline, impatiently. "If the Prince be only one-tenth as particular——But talking of the Prince reminds me that I have not expressed my opinion of the Dukes of Cumberland and Clarence. The former looks like a murderous ruffian—and the latter like an idiot."

The Earl of Malmesbury was about to remonstrate for the hundredth time when a page entered—approached his lordship—whispered a few words—and immediately retired.

"Your Royal Highness," said the nobleman, "let me implore you to recollect all the good counsel

wherewith I have at different times endeavoured to prepare you for the solemn moment that is now at hand!"

"Then the Prince has arrived?" said Caroline, her heart fluttering with expectation: and at the next moment she heaved a sigh as she thought of the young, the handsome, and the far-off Baron Bergami!

CHAPTER CLXXVII.

THE MEETING.

The preceding conversation between Caroline of Brunswick and the Earl of Malmesbury, and which was carried on in the French language, has no doubt tended to throw some additional light upon the character of that amiable princess. A child of nature, art and artifice had not entirely weaned her from the habit of thinking and acting as nature prompted;—and it has doubtless struck the reader that to an almost girlish candour and juvenile ingenuousness of disposition, she united a keen appreciation of right and wrong—an accurate discrimination between justice and injustice—and a power of separating the artificial from the real, the dross from the pure ore, in her estimation of individuals, of society, or of things. Her natural quickness at rejoinder and repartee made her a formidable antagonist against a person who had a bad argument to sustain;—and the occasional freedoms of speech in which she indulged, and which can scarcely be called levities, must not be judged according to the English standard of etiquette and delicacy, but must be attributed to the greater license allowed by continental manners and customs in that respect.

But we shall prefer the plan of suffering the true character of the Princess Caroline to develop itself gradually to the reader, in proportion as the narrative itself proceeds, rather than pause on this occasion to chronicle a lengthened commentary on the subject. We will therefore at once hasten to observe that scarcely had the deep-drawn sigh heaved to the memory of Baron Bergami, escaped her lips, when the Prince of Wales entered the apartment.

Caroline instantaneously rose from her chair and advanced to meet her intended husband.

Rapid was the glance which each threw at the other,—with a mutual curiosity, eager and intense on either side, to know the *best* or the *worst* that was to be gleaned in that first transitory survey!

Simultaneously as their looks met, so did they fall for an instant: then they encountered each other again—and this time the eyes of the Princess were cast down beneath the bolder, and stronger, and more searching scrutiny that her intended husband now bestowed upon her.

The Prince went thither already so complete a prey to prejudice, that had he found in the Princess an angel of perfection, his imagination would have prompted him to behold heaven's own radiance through the dingy medium of earth's grossest atmosphere. It was not that he had merely been assured she was not beautiful: but pains had been systematically taken to render her an object of loathing, abhorrence, and disgust in respect to those very points on which he was known to be most particular. Thus, although at the very first glance he saw enough to convince him that she was not quite so repulsive as he had been led to suppose yet the inveteracy of pre-conceived impressions would not allow him to behold sufficient to afford him any pleasing surprise or agreeable disappointment.

On the side of the Prince, therefore, it was a very bad opinion slightly improved by the first survey: but on that of the Princess it was a very good opinion much moderated by the same result. *He* had expected to find her a disgusting creature—whereas he could not help acknowledging at the first glance that the portraiture had been overcoloured: *she* had expected to encounter the very personification of all masculine beauty, dignity, grace, affability, and fascination—whereas she could not help thinking that her future husband was somewhat stout, that his countenance had a drunken looking flush, and that he was by no means the exquisite Adonis public report, private letters, and his own portrait had represented him.

Thus, within the first minute of their encounter—and before a single word was exchanged—the Princess rose a few degrees in the estimate of the Prince, while he fell proportionately in her judgment.

But scarcely had those glances been exchanged,—glances which engendered impressions, or rather altered and modified pre-conceived ones, with the rapidity which thought alone can achieve,—scarcely had the royal couple found themselves standing face to face, when the Earl of Malmesbury ceremoniously introduced them to each other.

Then the Princess, in obedience to a hint previously given by that noble oracle of courtly etiquette, knelt down at the feet of her intended husband: while the latter, actuated by the observances of the same conventional code, hastened to raise her and touch her forehead with his lips. But scarcely had he performed this ceremony when he turned rudely, brutally, and even savagely away;—and, dragging Malmesbury aside, hastily whispered, "I am altogether overcome: she is not a fit wife for me! Get me a glass of brandy—or I shall be ill."

"Permit me to remind your Royal Highness," said the grave, solemn, and sententious Malmesbury, "that the rules of etiquette make no mention of brandy on such an occasion as the present."

"Damn the rules of etiquette!" ejaculated the Prince brutally. "I will go to the Queen and tell her that I'll sooner forfeit my right to the crown than take that German slut as my wife."

And with these words the heir-apparent to the British throne—*the first gentleman in Europe*—flung himself out of the room, banging the door violently behind him.

Utterly discomfitted, the Earl of Malmesbury staggered against the wall—perfectly aghast at the extraordinary scene which had just taken place, and with all his notions relative to Court etiquette thrown into such a complete jumble that if anybody had asked him at the moment whether it was proper to stand upon one's head or one's heels in the King's presence, he would have been totally incompetent to solve the difficulty.

The interview between the Prince of Wales and Caroline of Brunswick had lasted exactly *three minutes*;—and on seeing him depart in the pre-

cipitate manner just mentioned, the Princess was for a few moments a prey to the deepest indignation. Her pride was wounded—and she felt as if a cruel outrage had been perpetrated against her. But her natural kindness of disposition and good humour speedily came to her aid;—and, accosting Lord Malmesbury with a smile, she said, "Was it in pursuance of your English rules of etiquette that his Royal Highness fled so abruptly?"

"Ah! pardon him, royal lady," exclaimed the nobleman, who, being recalled to himself by that very pertinent question, suddenly perceived the absolute necessity of giving some gloss to the brutal rudeness of the Prince. "It was natural that his Royal Highness should be deeply moved on such an occasion."

"But methought I heard him give vent to the favourite oath of you Englishmen," observed Caroline, with a look of increasing good-humour; "was it not so?"

"God forbid!" ejaculated the Earl, unhesitatingly giving utterance to an impudent falsehood. "His Royal Highness could not possibly be guilty of such an unpardonable breach of courtesy. At the dinner-table presently he will shine to that advantage which will win the affections as well as secure the admiration of your Royal Highness. As to his personal appearance—I need scarcely ask your Royal Highness whether you are well pleased——"

"Oh! indeed, he is much fatter than I expected to find him," exclaimed the Princess, speaking out her real sentiments as freely, boldly, and ingenuously as she would have passed an opinion upon a picture: "and I must likewise observe that he has a somewhat dissipated look."

"Such remarks, may it please your Royal Highness," said Lord Malmesbury gravely, "are quite out of place."

"Then why did you question me upon the subject?" demanded the Princess, surveying the cour-

tier with surprise and mistrust—for she began to think that there was a great deal of cold selfishness in his doctrines and insincerity in his conduct.

"According to the routine of Courts, there are set answers to set questions," replied his lordship.

"Such is not altogether the case at my father's Court," observed the Princess, with a sigh: and she wished that she was safe back again in Brunswick.

The discourse between herself and Lord Malmesbury was now interrupted by the entrance of Lady Jersey, Mrs. Harcourt, and Mrs. Harvey Aston, who conducted the Princess to the apartments prepared for her temporary accommodation in Saint James's Palace.

While submitting to the process of the dinner-toilette, Caroline chatted familiarly with the three ladies; and to the Countess of Jersey she was especially polite and amiable. Mrs. Harcourt, the Bedchamber Woman, was a middle-aged person—very servile and very garrulous: Lady Jersey has already been described;—and it only remains for us to observe that Mrs. Harvey Aston was a very handsome woman, about four-and-thirty years of age, and one of the Prince's numerous mistresses. Thus two of the royal voluptuary's paramours were installed in close intimacy about the person of the Princess who in three days was to become his wife.

When the dinner-toilette was nearly concluded, Caroline suddenly observed, "By the bye, my dear Jersey, do you know wherefore I have taken such an amazing fancy to you?"

"I am at a loss to conceive what humble merit on my part should have won me the honour of your Royal Highness's favour," was the response delivered by the Countess, in the usual sycophantic style of courtly phraseology.

"Your fame reached my ears in Germany," continued the Princess; "and rumour declared that you were not only a very handsome woman, but also one of the Prince's best friends."

"Indeed!" ejaculated the Countess, the warm red blood boiling scarlet up to the very surface of her beautiful polished skin of delicate olive: and, affecting to be busied at the toilette-table, she turned aside to conceal her confusion.

"Yes—such were the rumours which reached my ears," proceeded Caroline, in her wonted good-humoured, inconsiderate manner, and without the slightest intention to produce any excitement either in a bad or good sense: "and though, to tell you the candid truth, I can pretty well guess the meaning of your great friendship with the Prince, I am not angry now, nor shall I be jealous hereafter. I am not such an idiot as to suppose that a man, with such advantages and opportunities, will prove a saint; and I have made up my mind not to vex him in any way. You may therefore tell him, my dear Jersey, the first time you happen to be alone with him—which I dare say will be tolerably soon," added her Royal Highness, laughing heartily,—"you may assure him, I say, that so far from being jealous of you, I at once treated you with marked cordiality and signalled you as one of my best friends."

"Is this sarcasm—wit—or pure stolidity?" demanded Lady Jersey, in a hasty whisper, of Mrs. Harvey Aston, as they stood together at the toilette-table.

"Pure stolidity—utter folly—girlish nonsense," was the reply given in an equally prompt manner and low tone. "She is a complete fool."

"A downright idiot," responded the Countess of Jersey: then, turning towards the Princess, she said aloud, "I thank your Royal Highness for the promise of friendship so graciously made me: but I cannot undertake to become the bearer of any verbal messages to his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales."

"Well, then, I will take an opportunity of putting him at his ease with respect to yourself," said Caroline, in her wonted off-hand manner of honest sincerity, in which however there was nothing coarse and nothing vulgar.

The toilette was complete—and the Princess, attended by the three ladies, repaired to the banquetting-room. The King received her with marked kindness—the Queen, who was a thoroughly heartless woman, with as studied a reserve. The Princesses Sophia, Amelia, and Augusta were present on the occasion, and treated Caroline of Brunswick with the utmost tenderness and consideration. They observed the ill-natured coldness of demeanour assumed by their mother: and they endeavoured to atone for that scandalous inhospitality and cold-blooded cruelty by the warmth of their own attentions. The Duke of Clarence was good-naturedly soft and harmlessly foolish—as he always showed himself—for he was scarcely two removes from an idiot: while the Duke of Cumberland, whose countenance expressed all the darkest passions of the human soul, endeavoured to render himself agreeable, but was viewed by the Princess of Brunswick with emotions of mingled terror and suspicion.

And how did the Prince of Wales comport himself upon this occasion? As a matter of course he sate next to his intended bride; and, for common decency's sake, he was civil and attentive to her—but no more! There was naught of cordiality in his manner; and as for love—*that* was out of the question. Nevertheless he watched her with an eager curiosity, and listened with a deep attention to every word she uttered. For he felt that his honour was involved, or at all events his pride was concerned, in the qualifications and attributes of the woman who was to become his wife. Thus was he upon this occasion more inclined to study her impartially and judge her honestly than during the *three minutes* they were together ere now.

He saw and could not help acknowledging within himself that if she were even the devil, she had been painted much blacker than she really was. Her teeth were sound and good—as fine as those which adorned any of the Prince's most cherished mistresses: her hair was of a pure auburn—silken, luxuriant, and glossy;—and her bust was evidently superb. Thus far the account was in favour of the Princess. But on the other hand the poison of prejudice and the venom of malignant bias had been so deeply instilled into the heart, soul, and senses of the Prince, that he viewed all her little amiabilities as failings, all her peculiarities as faults, and all her inexperiences as downright vulgarities. Her good humour he took for familiarity—her hilarity for coarseness—her cheerfulness for unmannerly forwardness. In that natural generosity which made her treat her lady-dependants as equals instead of inferiors, and prompted her to elevate *them* to the rank of *her* friends, the Prince beheld a most heinous departure from the usages of Courts;—and in every display of nature's pure, honest, and unadul-

trated feeling on the part of her Royal Highness her intended husband would persist in seeing naught save the most unpardonable solecisms with regard to etiquette. But no pen can depict his horror, amazement, and disgust, when the well-meaning and artless Caroline seized an opportunity to whisper in his ear the promised communication relative to the Countess of Jersey!

The fact was that her Royal Highness had been over-tutored by Malmesbury. One of his lessons was that if she ever became aware of any of the Prince's intrigues, she must be cautious not to exhibit the slightest jealousy;—and thus the inexperienced Princess was now hurried by her good intentions into the calamitous fault of proclaiming to the Prince *in words* that forbearance which, if she were disposed to show it at all, should only have been displayed *in conduct*. And the Prince himself was too narrow-minded in his genteel fastiliousness to understand or appreciate the generous purpose which his intended wife entertained—and too deeply prejudiced against her to pardon the ungainly fashion into which her very innocence and inexperience hurried her when desirous of manifesting that purpose. The incident, therefore, only tended to enhance his disgust at her manners, conduct, and style of conversation;—and these deepening impressions of disfavour were by no means counterbalanced by the improved opinion he was compelled to form in respect to her personal appearance. He drank copiously to drown thought; and the Princess, with her natural quickness perceiving that he was addicted to the bottle, found herself rapidly becoming more and more disenchanted with regard to the *first gentleman* and *most polished Prince* in Europe!

The dinner was over—the guests were retiring—Caroline of Brunswick had withdrawn to her own apartments—and at length the Prince of Wales found an opportunity of speaking a few words in private to his royal mother. Conducting the Queen to the farther end of the superb saloon where the evening had been passed, he said in a low deep tone, "Your Majesty can now express an opinion upon the Princess!"

"George, I am sick at heart—no—that is not the feeling," exclaimed Queen Charlotte, with a concentrated bitterness in her accent and an almost fiend-like expression in her looks: "but I am devoured with rage and indignation to think that you should be thus sacrificed! It is all your father's doing—and you know he is as obstinate as Satan himself. I warned him against this alliance—I implored—I threatened: but all was unavailing—and now my worst fears are confirmed. Caroline is not a fit wife for you—and the marriage will be an unhappy one!"

"Why did not your Majesty warn, implore, and threaten *me*, instead of my father?" demanded the Prince, his words and looks both expressing the bitterest sarcasm. "Methinks that I was the principal person to whom you should have deigned the revelation of your real sentiments: but I never even knew that your Majesty had objected to this match until this evening."

"And who told you so, George?" exclaimed the Queen.

"Your manner towards the Princess made me suspect it," was the answer; "and Lady Jersey confirmed the fact."

"Yes — Lady Jersey and myself had a few minutes' conversation together after dinner," observed the Queen, looking her son very hard in the face, as if to ascertain how much the Countess had really told him: then, perceiving a sardonic smile beginning to wreath the Prince's lips, she said hastily, "But I suppose that whatever I *did* state to Lady Jersey will be made known to you within an hour or two—and therefore I may as well give you the explanation myself. I told her, then," added Queen Charlotte, a sinister gloom lowering over her harsh and disagreeable features, while her voice sank at the same time to the lowest possible whisper,—"I told Lady Jersey that henceforth I would be *her* friend if she would continue to be *your* friend! And more than that, I assured her that when the storm should come—that storm which is inevitable—I would take *her* part and *your* part, whatever may betide."

"Ah! then your Majesty already anticipates a domestic convulsion at Carlton House?" said the Prince, still with a concentrated bitterness in his tone: "and you are preparing in time for the part you shall play when my wife and I go to loggerheads? That is the plain English of it—and much plainer English indeed than I am usually accustomed to speak."

"Put what construction you please upon my conduct, George," observed the Queen, after a few moments' consideration: "but let one thing at least be engraven on your memory—and let it serve as the text for all your self-communings at a future day!"

"And that one thing?" demanded the Prince, surveying his royal mother with mingled interest and curiosity. "What is it?"

"That in *me* the Princess Caroline has a bitter and an unforgiving enemy," rejoined the Queen, the words hissing snake-like through the lips that were white and quivering.

Bad and unprincipled as was the heir-apparent—heartless, cruel, and selfish as his disposition might be—he was nevertheless struck with a species of horror at this cold-blooded announcement on the part of his mother. A man may be a murderer himself, and can yet think well of human nature generally: but if he suddenly finds out that his own mother is a murderess—the being who possesses the *prestige* of all-excelling goodness in his eyes—his confidence in everything human is annihilated in an instant. Thus was it with the Prince of Wales. His own mother had suddenly thrown off the mask and revealed herself to him as a fiend in female shape;—and he gazed upon her in mingled horror, wonderment, and distress.

But she darted upon him a look full of contempt as much as to imply that even yet he did not half comprehend the true meaning of the words to which she had given utterance: then, quitting him abruptly, she retired for the night.

CHAPTER CLXXVIII.

THE DISGUISED ONE.

We must now return to the Countess of Desborough and Miss Plantagenet, who quitted the sponging-house together in the manner already

described. The carriage which had brought Eleanor and the Duchess of Devonshire to Chancery Lane belonged to the former: she and Miss Plantagenet accordingly entered the vehicle, which drove rapidly away towards the West End.

"Whither can I have the pleasure of taking you?" inquired the Countess, when she and her young companion were ensconced side by side in the luxurious carriage.

"Do not allow any consideration on my account to interfere with your ladyship's arrangements," said Miss Plantagenet.

"I have no arrangements fixed for this morning—unless indeed it be to call in the Edgware Road," observed the Countess. "It is somewhat early to pay such a visit; but as I am very intimate with the lady to whose residence I am about to proceed, the time of day matters little. If you feel disposed to accompany me, Miss Plantagenet, I shall be glad of your society—and the carriage will then be at your service to take you to your own abode."

"I shall experience much pleasure in accompanying your ladyship," replied Miss Plantagenet.

The Countess of Desborough accordingly pulled the check-string and ordered the coachman to drive to Bellenden Priory, Edgeware Road. The vehicle rolled rapidly along; and during the half-hour which elapsed ere it stopped, Eleanor and her young companion conversed upon those general topics which could alone engage the attention of two persons who were almost strangers to each other. But though thus strangers, yet a certain degree of cordiality, if not a positive intimacy, at once sprang up between the Countess and Miss Plantagenet: inasmuch as the former looked upon the latter as the cousin of her own dearest and best friend, the Duchess of Devonshire.

Presently the carriage stopped at Bellenden Priory; and while the footman dismounted from behind the vehicle and rang the bell at the gate, Miss Plantagenet surveyed the large rambling edifice with some degree of attention from the window of the vehicle.

"It is a strange old building," remarked the Countess; "but very handsomely fitted-up within. Have you ever been here before?"

"Never," replied Miss Plantagenet. "I have however heard a great deal relative to the Marchioness of Bellenden and her law-suit with the Montgomery family. But I have never seen her ladyship—at least, not to my knowledge——"

"You will find her an amiable, unassuming, kind-hearted woman," observed the Countess of Desborough. "She lives in a comparatively strict seclusion: but my husband and myself are amongst the few friends who enjoy her intimacy."

At this moment the garden gate was opened by a porter in plain livery; and the Countess of Desborough alighted from the carriage, followed by Miss Plantagenet. Traversing the garden, which was laid out in a beautifully picturesque style, they reached the front entrance—ascended the marble steps—and were conducted by the domestic into a spacious hall surrounded by suits of armour, antique vases, and statues. A splendid staircase, with oaken ballusters magnificently carved, led to a landing ornamented with porcelain jars filled with curious artificial flowers; and thence opened the drawing-room into which the Countess of Desborough and Miss Plantagenet were shown.

The Marchioness of Bellenden, who was alone in the apartment when the visitresses were announced, rose from the sofa and hastened forward to welcome Lady Desborough in the kindest manner: but the instant that she threw her eyes upon Miss Plantagenet, she started visibly—then bowed hastily and distantly—and, turning abruptly away, conducted the Countess to a seat.

Eleanor did not observe this little excitement—or rather transitory flurry—on the part of the Marchioness: but Miss Plantagenet *did*, and was evidently much surprised thereat. Indeed, as this mysterious young lady took a seat of her own accord, she murmured to herself, "The Marchioness cannot possibly suspect who I am—for I never saw her before in all my life, to my knowledge; and it is scarcely probable that she should know *me*!"

"I really quite forgot to introduce my young friend to you, Laura!" exclaimed the Countess of Desborough: "but you will pardon the oversight, which was occasioned by the pleasure I experienced in seeing you after some weeks' separation. Miss Plantagenet—a cousin of the Duchess of Devonshire——"

"Miss Plantagenet is welcome as *your* friend, Eleanor," said the Marchioness of Bellenden, in whose tone and manner there was evidently something which implied mistrust or suspicion, or else pure annoyance at the introduction of a stranger to the Priory: but immediately subduing the sentiment, whatever it were, her ladyship threw upon Miss Plantagenet a benignant smile, observing, "You are welcome to the Priory: and if I did not give you that assurance the moment you entered the room, it was because the almost recluse-like retirement in which I live renders me slow in greeting new-comers until I learn who they are."

Miss Plantagenet gave a graceful inclination of the head in acknowledgment of these explanatory remarks; and the Marchioness of Bellenden, turning towards Lady Desborough, said, "I have not seen you since Stamford Manor came into your possession. How do you like your new property?"

"Very much, so far as the house and grounds are concerned," replied the Countess: "but the associations are gloomy and dispiriting. You must remember that it was within those walls the unfortunate and guilty Lady Stamford put a period to her own existence——"

"Oh! but you possess too strong a mind, Eleanor," exclaimed the Marchioness, "to be influenced by superstitious terrors."

"Still there are feelings of horror and dread which will grow upon us at times, even if we put no faith in apparitions," observed the Countess. "But generally speaking, both the Earl and myself are well pleased with our new estate. And now tell me, dear Laura, how progresses your own law-suit—and likewise that affair of the deserving young artist, Mr. George Woodfall——"

"Not a word upon either subject at present—not a syllable!" exclaimed the Marchioness of Bellenden, with an excitement which evidently amazed the Countess of Desborough as being something so unusual on the part of one whose habitual manner was so serene, tranquil, and benignant.

"You cannot fancy, my dear Laura," observed

the Countess, "that Miss Plantagenet is either interested in the topics which I ventured to broach, or capable of repeating elsewhere anything that we may say confidentially here."

"I impute nothing whatever to your friend, Eleanor," said the Marchioness, in a tone of decision: "but surely the matters to which you alluded can have no possible interest for Miss Plantagenet—and therefore to discuss them, would be to exclude her from the conversation altogether."

"I yield to your wishes, Laura," observed the Countess.

"When did you come up to town?" inquired Lady Bellenden.

"Last evening," was the response. "And on my arrival in Berkeley Square I was much distressed to learn that my friend Mrs. Fitzherbert was involved in the most cruel embarrassments. Indeed, to tell you the truth, she had been arrested for debt, and was in a dreadful place which is called a lock-up house. Accordingly, the first thing this morning I hastened to Devonshire House; and her Grace instantaneously consented to accompany me to Chancery Lane, where poor Mrs. Fitzherbert was imprisoned. On our arrival there, we found Miss Plantagenet and a certain Lady Lade — a somewhat notorious character whom I was not over well pleased to encounter——"

"I have already assured your ladyship that she is no friend of mine," observed Miss Plantagenet, doubtless entertaining fears for her own reputation after having been found in such questionable society. "She was already at that place when I crossed its threshold last night."

"Ah! then you slept there, Miss Plantagenet?" said the Marchioness of Bellenden, interrogatively. "Were you not alarmed at passing the night in a species of prison?—for such must be the character of the house alluded to."

"The three ladies were altogether in one room," observed the Countess of Desborough; "and I suppose they considered themselves collective and mutual protection. At all events you were not disturbed in the night, I believe?" added Eleanor, turning towards Miss Plantagenet.

"Not in the slightest degree," was the answer.

"Perhaps Miss Plantagenet had a bed to herself and slept soundly," said the Marchioness of Bellenden.

"Miss Plantagenet, on the contrary, was Mrs. Fitzherbert's companion," remarked the Countess of Desborough. "But really our conversation has turned upon the most trivial and ridiculous details: and I shall therefore hasten to inform you, Laura, that having called at the lock-up house, I was frightened away by the sudden arrival of the Prince. Miss Plantagenet was as unwilling to meet his Royal Highness as I was; and we therefore hurried off together. Then I proposed the visit to Bellenden Priory—and now I have given a full and complete account of myself."

"You will remain and pass the day with me, Eleanor?" said the Marchioness, who did not however give the invitation with that cordiality which claimed a prompt acceptance and forbade a refusal.

"Not on the present occasion," returned the Countess. "The Earl is in town—and I promised to accompany him in the afternoon to pay several visits. Moreover, I am afraid that I have already disturbed you—or interfered with some arrangements——"

"Far from it," interrupted the Marchioness. "You are unkind to make such an observation, Eleanor—since you know that I have not a dearer friend in the world than yourself. But you must come and see me again to-morrow—or next day—and then we will have a long discourse together."

"Be it so," said the Countess. "By the way, what has become of that beautiful girl whom I saw here the last time I called?"

"She is still residing with me," answered Lady Bellenden, with a rapid glance of uneasiness at Miss Plantagenet as she spoke. "A more amiable, virtuous, kind-hearted creature never breathed than my young *protegée;* and were she my own daughter, I could not love her more devotedly than I do. She has endured much sorrow—much persecution likewise——"

"You told me the chief details of her narrative when I was last here," observed the Countess of Desborough. "Poor girl! she is not the only one whom the Prince of Wales has sought to ensnare: but she is one of the very few who have had the courage to resist, and the happiness to escape him!"

While the two ladies were thus discoursing, Miss Plantagenet indulged in a tolerably searching survey of the Marchioness. Indeed, whenever Lady Bellenden was not looking towards her, Miss Plantagenet was devouring her with an ardour somewhat remarkable in a modest and well-behaved young female.

We have stated in a previous chapter that the Marchioness was now about thirty-seven years of age and that she was very handsome. The garb of widowhood which she wore, set off her dazzling complexion to the utmost advantage, and enhanced the soft serenity of expression which usually sate upon her countenance. Her dark chesnut hair glossy as velvet, appeared in bands beneath the border of the snowy cap which seemed to become her as entirely and completely as if it were in sooth a coquettish appropriation of a peculiar article of vesture to a particular style of beauty. Between the vermilion freshness of the lips the teeth showed white as ivory: the hands were delicately fair and admirably modelled;—and feet, long but narrow, peeped forth from the skirt of the mourning drapery.

Although the high corsage of the dress completely concealed the bosom, and the arms were imprisoned in their long sleeves,—yet was it impossible for even the most inert imagination to do otherwise than depict unto itself the contours of the bust and the symmetry of the arms. Nor less would the admirer of the fair sex have been forced to admit that this general concealment of her rich and glowing beauties only rendered the Marchioness of Bellenden more indescribably charming and enhanced ten thousand times the sensual and seductive power which so splendid a woman must under any circumstances have possessed.

But while Miss Plantagenet was wondering within herself whether the Marchioness entertained any suspicion regarding her,—or whether the little peculiarities in her behaviour were traceable only to a natural prudence and reserve in speaking to

freely before strangers,—while Miss Plantagenet was thus deliberating, we say, the door opened and Rose Foster entered the apartment.

"My dear girl," exclaimed the Countess of Desborough, hastening forward to meet her with a generous enthusiasm,—"I was just making the kindest inquiries concerning you. Allow me to introduce my friend Miss Plan——"

"Oh! what means this masquerading?" cried Rose Foster, with an ejaculation of mingled surprise and alarm, as her looks encountered those of the false Miss Plantagenet: then, instantaneously recollecting certain past incidents, she flew frantically towards the Marchioness of Bellenden, exclaiming, "Save me, dear lady—save me from that nobleman in disguise! He is one of the patrons of the infamous Mrs. Brace——and it can be for no good purpose that Lord Florimel, thus disguised——"

"Lord Florimel!" ejaculated the Countess of Desborough, a light breaking in upon her, and the whole deception flashing to her mind in a moment.

But the young nobleman—for he indeed it was—had no disposition to remain and face three angry, outraged women. In Rose Foster he had instantaneously recognised that same Camilla Morton whom Mrs. Brace had once offered to sell unto his arms: and the moment she gave vent to the ejaculatory remarks which showed that the recognition was mutual and that his exposure was imminent, he prepared for a hurried retreat. No sooner, therefore, was his name flung forth from the lips of the terrified and astonished girl, than he sprang to the door—threw it open—and rushed towards the stairs. But his foot caught in a mat—he fell heavily—and his forehead came in contact with one of the porcelain vases that adorned the landing.

He heard and saw no more: consciousness had abandoned him!

* * * * * *

* * * * *

When Lord Florimel slowly returned to himself—awaking gradually from the deep trance in which he had been plunged—he found himself lying in bed, but enveloped with a darkness as black as that of a sepulchre. A stupendous silence likewise entombed him: and while no gleam of light reached the eye, no footstep nor voice met the ear.

By degrees his ideas began to settle themselves in the proper departments of the brain;—and when he recalled to mind everything that had taken place at the sponging-house—next his ride in the carriage along with Lady Desborough—and lastly, his visit to Bellenden Priory, he raised his hand to his brow to steady the recollections which were rolling in upon his bewildered and attenuated brain. But, ah! was it a bandage which his fingers encountered?—a bandage around his head? Yes—and now he remembered that he had fallen in his endeavour to fly from the Priory!

Where was he at present, then? In his own house? No: for on stretching out his arms, he grasped curtains with fringes quite different from any that belonged to the fittings of his own mansion. Was he, then, at the Priory? It was scarcely probable Lady Bellenden would have suffered him to remain there, if it were at all possible to have removed him without endangering his life!

But while he was yet tossing as it were upon the turmoil of his bewildering reflections, a clock began to chime.

Heavens!—what a thrill of mingled amazement, ecstacy, and suspense, ran through his entire form, as the notes of those musical bells struck upon his ear. For he had heard them before—Oh! he was convinced he had heard them before,—heard them under circumstances, too, the mere reminiscence of which made his whole being glow with rapture, despite of the condition of exhaustion into the consciousness of which he had just awoke.

The chimes ceased—and all was profoundly still again.

Then raising himself up in the couch, Florimel ascertained with his hands its position in respect to the wall: and afterwards he thrust forth his arms to feel for a particular object near the bed's head. Yes—it was there—it encountered his touch,—that large arm-chair in which he had deposited his clothes on a certain occasion!

More agitated grew his feelings,—but with a blissful and ecstatic emotion, as he pursued his researches. Descending cautiously from the couch, for he felt that he was so weak as to be scarcely able to sustain himself upon his limbs,—he felt for the table—and then he groped about for the sofa. And he found them,—yes, found them in precisely the position which he had expected—each in the spot which he had so accurately foreknown.

Overcome by the gush of joyous memories and the still more delicious hopes which now sped through his brain, he sank down upon that sofa;—and there he lay for a few minutes, not so much to collect his thoughts as to indulge in the deep luxuriousness which they were rapidly assuming.

Silence and darkness still environed him: but he perceived that the atmosphere was pleasantly warm and delicately perfumed. Suddenly the idea flashed to his mind that the key to the reading of the great secret was at this moment in his possession: in a word, that he need only use his hands and his eyes for a moment to ascertain where he was. For that this was *the boudoir of love and of mystery* he had already obtained the conviction:—but where was it situated?—to what mansion did it belong?—and in what part of London might it be?

Rising from the sofa, Lord Florimel felt his way to the window. The curtains were of thick velvet, and were not only closely drawn, but likewise fastened down the middle with large buttons. He opened them: and his hands now encountered the shutters. These were secured with a massive iron bar running all across, and fixed with a padlock. The key of this padlock was not there: the shutters were therefore immoveable—and not even a single chink nor joint was wide enough to admit a gleam from without, even though it were broad mid-day. But whether it were morning, noon, or night, Florimel was utterly unable to determine.

Quitting the casement, the young nobleman felt his way to the door. He had not the slightest hope of finding it unlocked: and the result was as he had expected. It was well secured—and so firm in its frame-work that his hand could not shake it.

Returning to the sofa, he resumed his reclining posture upon it,—murmuring to himself, "Well, at all events if I am a prisoner, the gaol where I am

confined is one fraught with the most pleasing reminiscences and the most delicious hopes. But I would that my fair gaoler were here with me—the more so, inasmuch as I begin to feel famished for want of food!"

"Think you, dear Florimel, that I should neglect you?" whispered the soft, dulcet, and never-to-be-forgotten voice of the Unknown Lady: and the next instant the young nobleman was clasped in her arms.

One long delicious kiss,—a kiss sustained for upwards of a minute by mouth glued to mouth,—sent a burning thrill through the forms of the paramours thus reunited;—and then the lady, reaching some delicate refreshments from the table, made Florimel partake thereof as he lay half-reclining in her arms and with his head pillowed upon her glowing, naked bosom.

"Tell me, my charming friend," he said, "how long have I been unwell—hours or days? For I am utterly ignorant on that head."

"This is the third day after the accident," murmured the Unknown. "It is the 8th of April—and it is now about seven in the evening. But how you came *here*—how it happens that *I* am your nurse——"

"Then I am not at Bellenden Priory?" said Florimel, hastily.

"Can you think it possible?" demanded the Unknown. "But you must not talk too much now—nor must I engage your attention too long. You have been delirious—and the doctor has given you opiates. In a few moments you must return to your couch, and endeavour to enjoy a sound refreshing sleep. Then to-morrow morning you will awake convalescent; and I shall be enabled to give you such explanations as you require."

"Be it as you say, my charming nurse," cried Florimel, bestowing a warm kiss upon the breast that had just served as his pillow.

He now returned to bed; and when he was once more ensconced in the luxurious couch, the Unknown seated herself in the arm-chair by the side; and, with one of his hands clasped in her own, she seemed anxious and ready to perform all the duties of a good nurse and afford all the tender ministrations of a loving woman.

CHAPTER CLXXIX.

THE MARRIAGE.

We are now about to enter upon one of the most important and interesting episodes of our narrative,—an episode which is marked with a date constituting a fatal era in the lives of two individuals. Yes—fatal to the honour of the vile Prince who swore to love a woman whom he had almost previously made up his mind to hate,—and fatal to the unhappy, amiable, and excellent Princess whom circumstances made the sacrifice to expediency and the victim of a cold-blooded, heartless, and cowardly tyrant!

It was in the evening of the 8th of April, 1795, that the marriage between their Royal Highnesses the Prince of Wales and Caroline of Brunswick was celebrated at the Royal Chapel, in St. James's Palace. The King, the Queen, and all the Royal Family were present,—save and except the Duke of York: for this cowardly and incompetent braggart was absent on the continent, where he was leading the British troops into all kinds of disaster, defeat, and disgrace.

We need hardly say that the bridal ceremony was characterised by all the pomp, ostentation, and splendour which the British Court had ever kept up at the expense of the crushed, wronged, and plundered people. The Queen was bedizened with diamonds, while her nostrils were black with snuff: and the precious stones which gemmed the ostrich plumes and shone upon the brows, and necks, and bosoms, and arms of the Princesses and other ladies present, might have paid off a handsome instalment of the National Debt.

The King wore upon his countenance that stolid smile of satisfaction which was peculiar to him: the Queen was stern in her studied composure and severe in her prim stateliness. The Princess Amelia surveyed Caroline of Brunswick with a melancholy interest: for the royal Daughter of England doubtless presaged full well the destiny of her unhappy and as yet unsuspecting cousin!

And Caroline herself—how did she appear upon this solemn and memorable occasion? Nothing could be more touchingly amiable than her demeanour—nothing more winning than her whole aspect. Upon her countenance there was the habitual smile, but beaming faintly though not altogether subdued,—yet mingling with an expression which showed that she felt all the awe-inspiring associations of the ceremony, and that she resigned herself placidly and docilely to the path which had been prepared for her by others and which was not the one of her own choosing. There was also in her look a holy reliance upon the will of the Supreme Being, as the chief arbiter of those destinies which the machinery of Man put into motion, but which He could control at any moment!

And the Prince—how appeared *he* then and there? With a countenance flushed by drinking, and with eyes that swam vacantly in a bacchanalian mist, did he attend at the altar. His licentious looks lingered devouringly upon the much-exposed charms of the Countess of Jersey and Mrs. Harvey Aston;—and he even had the hardihood to bestow a significant smile upon the former—a token of regard which the infamous woman did not fail to greet with a triumphant expression of countenance, and reward with the sweetest wreathing of her red lips.

The Princess Caroline beheld these bare-faced signs of intelligence between the man who in five minutes would be her husband, and the woman who was already her too successful rival: and though for an instant the warm blood rushed to the countenance of the poor victim, and she experienced a sad tightening at the heart,—yet at the next moment she recovered all her self-possession through the aid of her divine temper, her enduring disposition, and her studied resolve to meet with resignation whatever might be in store for her.

And now the ceremony commenced. The Archbishop of Canterbury officiated; and the King himself gave the bride away. As the solemnity progressed, the pious resignation of the Princess deepened into a dejection against which she could not combat;—while the heir-apparent became irritable and impatient. Suddenly he perceived a tear—a pearly tear—fall from the countenance of the Princess on the edge of the velvet cushion whereon she knelt;—and, instead of being softened by that

touching proof of true feminine feelings, the Prince suffered—nay, even forced his imagination to seize upon the circumstance as a motive for self-annoyance. He reasoned within his own breast that Caroline ought to be too happy, too proud, and too grateful at becoming *his* wife, to be enabled to shed a tear: and he looked on that pure tribute of an artless woman's respect and love for the home and parents she had quitted, perhaps for ever,—he looked upon that diamond yielded up from a mine of feelings unfathomable to eyes whose powers of vision were restricted by the grossest worldly selfishness,—he looked upon that tear, we say, as an insult to himself!

The torture which he thus chose to inflict upon his own soul, goaded him to the quick: and he sprang abruptly from his kneeling position. The Archbishop stopped short in the midst of one of the most solemn and impressive portions of the ceremony—and all eyes were turned upon the Prince. A sickening feeling seized on the Princess of Brunswick;—a consternation fell on most of the others present: but an infernal delight sprang up in the hearts of the Queen, Lady Jersey, and Mrs. Harvey Aston. As for Lord Malmesbury—*he* was struck with dismay; and all his notions of etiquette were thrown into the most lamentable confusion.

But this scene was only of a few moments' duration. For the Prince of Wales, instantaneously struck by the conviction that he must either be taken for a drunkard or a madman, mumbled an apology—murmured something about "mistaking the proper time to rise"——and sank down on his knees again.

The sacred service then proceeded without further interruption;—and the only remaining incident worthy of note, relative to the solemn ceremony, was that the Earl of Malmesbury, instead of saying *Amen* along with the rest at the conclusion, gave vent to the word which was uppermost in his mind at the moment—namely, *Etiquette!*

And now the ceremony was over—the ordeal was passed through—the solemn mockery was accomplished—the sacrifice was consummated—and Caroline of Brunswick was now Princess of Wales!

The bridal party quitted the chapel and repaired to the drawing-rooms of the palace, where a brilliant company was already assembled; and her Royal Highness, the newly-married lady, was naturally the "observed of all observers." The quick eye of the sycophantic and servile aristocracy soon perceived, however—aye, in a very few minutes—that the Prince regarded his bride with anything rather than fond affection;—and thus the cue was received as to the opinions to be formed by those lickspittle lords and ladies on a subject concerning which they dared not adopt any sentiments of their own spontaneous initiation.

"My dear Lady Brunel," said the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery aside to her friend, "what do you think of the Princess?"

"What does the Prince himself think of her?" inquired the cautious lady thus addressed.

"Do you not perceive that he is restless—dissatisfied—and uneasy, in spite of all his endeavours to conceal the real state of his feelings with the gloss of his brilliant fascinations of look, language, and manner?"

"You are right, my dear Countess," responded Lady Brunel. "And moreover, his Royal Highness is—*flushed*," she added, in a scarcely audible whisper.

"Yes: he has evidently been—ahem!—*drinking*," observed the Countess, in an equally guarded tone.

"And I should say that he was pretty nearly—*tipsy*," rejoined Lady Brunel, now speaking so low that her voice was not more audible than her breathing.

"Yes: quite tipsy," echoed the Dowager-Countess Montgomery. "And *now*, my dear friend, what *do* you think of our new Princess?"

"That it is the coarsest, vulgarest, commonest importation from Germany with which *our* world of fashion has ever been afflicted," was Lady Brunel's prompt rejoinder.

And then the two gossips set themselves industriously to work to tear the Princess of Wales to pieces in the most unmerciful style of that heartless criticism which constitutes so important a feature in the occupation of ladies of fashion.

In another corner of the principal drawing-room an Earl and a Marquis had button-holed each other; and approaching their countenances with so much solemn mystery that the tips of their noses almost touched, they entered with awful caution and dread timidity upon the grand topic.

"Well, my dear friend, what does your lordship think of the bride?" asked the Earl, who was a man of about sixty-five years of age.

"Nay—rather let me hear what *you* think, my lord," said the Marquis, who was about ten years younger. "You have more experience than I in such matters.

"But what do you fancy the Prince thinks of her?" inquired the old Earl, cunningly beating about the bush to glean an opinion before he would venture to express any sentiment of his own.

"Does not your lordship perceive that at this very moment his Royal Highness is conversing with Lady Jersey, and that his back is actually turned towards his bride?" said the Marquis, in a slow and deliberate tone, every syllable he uttered being fraught with significancy.

"To be sure!" ejaculated the Earl: "it is precisely as your lordship represents."

"Well—and *now* what do you think of the Princess?" demanded the Marquis.

"Ah! there's only one opinion to be formed," was the prompt reply; "and that is by no means flattering to her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales. I suppose, in fact, we must treat her with coldness, and pass the word to our wives and daughters that she is to be *run down*?"

"Just so!" exclaimed the Marquis approvingly. "There can be no doubt as to that being the proper course for us to pursue."

The two nobles accordingly separated, each to find out his family in another part of the room and give them the truly Christian lesson which had just been agreed upon. Oh! the world has never seen and human nature has never been scandalised by a more cruel, remorseless, and cold-blooded set of persons than the English Aristocracy! Their servility is vile beyond all despising, and their heartlessness atrocious beyond all cursing.

The two dialogues we have just given will afford the reader a specimen of the general nature of the conversation which was current in the royal draw-

ing-rooms on the bridal evening. The Prince was the grand fugle-man whose movements were followed by the whole array of fashionables: his conduct towards his new-made wife was taken as a signal to be implicitly obeyed by that phalanx of lords and ladies whom the newspapers next morning denominated the "*elite* of the aristocracy!" Thus was the unfortunate Caroline of Brunswick fore-doomed, not only by her own husband—not only by his royal mother and his paramours—but likewise by all the men of rank, the titled dames, and the high-born damsels who ruled the world of fashion and gave a tone and impress to the *mind* of the upper classes!

But, as it will hereafter become our pleasing duty to show, the millions adopted a far different line of conduct when the period arrived for pronouncing an opinion between the Prince and the Princess;—and on *that* occasion, as on *all others*, did the honest, intelligent, and generous-hearted working classes of these islands adopt the cause of the weak against the strong—of the oppressed against the oppressor—of right against wrong—and of justice against tyranny!

In the meantime we must not anticipate any portion of those important, interesting, and tremendous events which we shall be called upon to chronicle: let us therefore at once resume the thread of our narrative in its proper place.

The festival was over—the drawing-rooms were deserted—the banquetting-table was abandoned—the valets were extinguishing the lights—and the last carriage was bearing away the latest guests from St. James's Palace. The clocks of the metropolis were proclaiming the hour of *one*: the King and Queen had repaired to Buckingham Palace;—and the Prince of Wales was bearing home his bride to Carlton House!

CHAPTER CLXXX.

THE BRIDAL CHAMBER.

On arriving at the princely mansion, the heir-apparent handed Caroline from the carriage and conducted her through the hall, amidst the ranks of bowing domestics—up the grand staircase—to the principal drawing-room. Lady Jersey, Mrs. Harcourt, and Mrs. Harvey Aston, who had followed from St. James's Palace in another carriage, were now in close attendance on the Princess; and after remaining for a few minutes in conversation in the drawing-room, those ladies conducted her Royal Highness away to the bridal chamber.

The instant he found himself alone, the Prince advanced hurriedly towards a table covered with refreshments—filled a large tumbler to the very brim with Port wine—and drank off the potent fluid at a draught. Then flinging himself upon a sofa, he gave way to his reflections.

But these were of no pleasurable character: and indeed his Royal Highness had many real sources of annoyance, in addition to the imaginary ones which the morbid condition of his mind had conjured up. In the first place, although the Prime Minister had consented to demand of Parliament a grant adequate to meet the liabilities of the Prince, he had insisted upon having a schedule of all his debts,—not a mere list of creditors' names and amounts due—but a detailed and business-like balance-sheet, showing for what purposes money had been raised—at what rates of interest the loans had been taken up—and the precise amount of consideration received for all bonds, bills, or other securities then in the market. Now it happened that many of these debts were either of so delicate a nature, or else were accompanied with such circumstances, that he could not possibly enter them in the schedule demanded. In that category was the sum he owed to the Marquis de Saint Croix; for the fact of his having taken the money of an unfortunate refugee as a *trust*, and then withheld repayment when it was solicited, would be regarded by the nation as a transaction of the most disgraceful character. And yet within the last three days the Marquis had been more than ever pressing for his money; and the Prince doubted not but that the Amazon was vindictively urging the Frenchman to be thus peremptory.

These portions of the royal debts which were associated with "delicate circumstances," were consequently no mean sources of annoyance to the Prince. Then, again, he had lately received a letter from Pauline Clarendon which contained an announcement that stirred up remorseful feelings in his breast,—the announcement that her sister Octavia was beyond all doubt in the way to become a mother!

In addition to those subjects for meditation, there was his marriage with a being against whom he had conceived a strong aversion;—and a presentiment of great evil, as yet unborn, but which would inevitably arise from this ill-assorted union, unfolded its dark and ominous wings overshadowingly upon his soul.

Therefore, during the half-hour which elapsed while he thus remained alone, he paid frequent visits to the side-table and poured the wine down his throat just as if it were water. The consequence was that his countenance acquired a ruddier glow—his eyes became bloodshot—the flesh forming their sockets grew swollen and inflamed—and his step was more unsteady with each journey he made between the sofa and the refreshment-table.

At length the door opened—and the Countess of Jersey made her appearance.

A glance at the Prince showed her the condition he was in: she saw that he was three parts intoxicated—and a smile of triumph for an instant shone upon her lips. But the next moment it changed into an expression of the most winning sweetness as she bent her lustrous, beaming, velvet-black eyes upon the drunken voluptuary whose swinish condition was only calculated to inspire disgust. She had however a certain part to perform—namely, to manage matters so that the newly-married couple should be mutually loathsome: and this part, which had been adopted by the Countess through motives of jealousy and envy towards her royal rival, was also encouraged by the Queen herself!

"The banquet of love is served up for my attendance, I suppose?" said his Royal Highness, with as much bitterness as a vacant manner and a difficulty of articulation would permit him to assume.

"The bridal chamber is in readiness for your reception, my well-beloved George," returned the Countess, placing herself by his side and taking his hand between both her own. "But you do not appear happy—and it cuts me to the soul to observe this downcast demeanour——"

"Frances, do you really love me?" demanded the Prince, abruptly.

"You know that I love you, George," replied the syren.

"Then pity me—pity me, my dearest friend," exclaimed the heir-apparent, who was becoming maudlin sentimental under the influence of the liquor he had imbibed.

"Oh! I do pity you, George—beloved George!" murmured the Countess, throwing her arms about his neck and covering his inflamed countenance with kisses. "But did I not tell you on the day of her arrival that *she* was no fitting wife for you?"

"The mischief was done—the evil was already consummated—and it was too late to retract," said the Prince, his speech interrupted with many a hiccup. "Six hundred thousand pounds of debts were not to be trifled with—they might have lost me the throne——But, perdition seize upon it!" he exclaimed with an almost savage abruptness: "fill me a tumbler of wine, Jersey—no paltry insignificant glass—but a good tumbler—and let me drown thought, and care, and everything that presses upon my mind."

The Countess hastened to perform the part of Hebe; and as she advanced to the refreshment table, the Prince followed all her movements with his eyes as if his lascivious looks could plunge beneath that rustling velvet which clothed her, and revel in the contemplation of all the charms concealed. Then as she returned towards him, with the brimming tumbler in her hand, he slowly and gloatingly surveyed the countenance that beamed with smiles—the bosom that was half exposed—the delicate hand that held the glass—and the beautiful feet and ankles that glancingly bore the graceful being over the thick carpet of the gorgeous saloon.

He took the wine—he kissed the hand that presented it—he drained the tumbler—and then he drew towards him the designing creature, the

effluent sensuousness of whose charms was stealing over him despite the emasculating effects of the deep potations in which he had indulged.

"You told me that you loved me, Frances?" he said, as he smoothed down her beauteous hair.

"I have told you so a thousand times, dear George," was the answer.

"Tell me, then, what I am to do," continued the Prince. "Shall I repair to the bridal chamber—or shall I at once let her Royal Highness understand that she is my wife only in name?"

"Oh! you must not carry matters to such a dangerous extreme as this," exclaimed the Countess. "Your treatment of her Royal Highness would get abroad—and the injury to your reputation would be irreparable. Come, my dear George," continued the artful woman,—"the time is passing rapidly—and it is now half-past two o'clock. Let me present you another glass of wine—and then to the nuptial chamber!"

"Be it so—be it so!" muttered the Prince, with subdued irritability of manner: then, after having drained the tumbler once more, he said, "And now, Frances, you must let me take your arm to—to—the door of—of—the bridal chamber: for my fee—ee—lings are overpow—ow—ering me."

Had his Royal Highness said that he was so drunk he could scarcely stand, he would have been nearer the mark: but a tipsy person seldom thinks that he is really intoxicated, and at all events is certain to assume any reason rather than the truth for his strangeness of conduct.

The Countess of Jersey supported the Prince as well as she was able: but he nearly dragged her down more than once as he staggered and stumbled along the passage leading to the nuptial apartment. Fortunately for his Royal Highness, there was no loitering dependant nor curious menial in the passage at the time;—and thus the beastly state of intoxication in which he was seeking the bridal chamber escaped the notice of any of the members of his household.

At length they reached that room which ought to have been made the sanctuary of love, but which a disgusting voluptuary was about to pollute with his presence. The conviction that he was *not* in a fit state to enter that chamber, appeared suddenly to flash to the mind of the Prince: and somewhat startled into sobriety, he pressed his hand to his brow—leant against the wall—and stared intently upon Lady Jersey's countenance for nearly a minute.

"My dear Frances," he muttered, in a faultering, hiccoughing tone, "I don't think—ink—that I'm altogether as I ought to be——"

"What *do* you fancy to be the matter with yourself, my dear George?" demanded the Countess, likewise speaking in an under-tone.

"I—I—begin to think—ink," stuttered his Royal Highness, with a look of hebetation and a stolid smile,—"that I'd much better go with you—to your room—oom—and pass the night—hic—in your—hic—arms."

"Much as I should rejoice, dear George, to have you as my companion," returned the Countess, her heart in reality heaving at the sickly vinous smell with which the royal voluptuary's breath was laden, "I must implore you to renounce the idea instantaneously. I have already told you that it would be ruinous——"

"True—true," muttered the Prince. "But I feel—eel—so—hic—so very queer."

"It is the excitement," remarked Lady Jersey, with a bewitching smile. "You have had a great deal to agitate you within the last few days."

"But don't you think, Frances—that is, I mean—hic—don't you really believe that I've taken a—hic—a leetle drop—just one glass—hic—too much?" said the Prince, his speech growing more broken and the power of sustaining himself upon his legs becoming every instant less effective.

"Do not entertain such notions, George," whispered the Countess, in a tone of tender remonstrance. "You are a little excited—but nothing more. Indeed, it is scarcely possible to perceive that you have been drinking anything at all."

"Are you sure, Frances?" asked the Prince, now really inclined to fancy himself sober, so sincere, frank, and ingenuous seemed the assurance which his patrician paramour gave him. "Well—if I'm sober, then, I'll make up my mind—hic—to—to——"

But here he swayed backward and forward in so alarming a manner, as he moved away from the wall against which he had been leaning, that he nearly fell headlong himself and brought the Countess down with him. She however exerted all her strength at the moment, and averted the disagreeable catastrophe: then, having received a few caresses which his Royal Highness thought fit to bestow upon her, Lady Jersey slowly opened the door of the nuptial chamber!

The Princess of Wales was reposing in the bridal bed. A soft and dreamy drowsiness had stolen gradually upon her when the Bed-Chamber Ladies had retired and she was left alone. It was not an actual slumber that steeped her senses in oblivion—but a partial somnolence which closed the eyes, lulled the physical energies into rest, and yet left the mind so far awake that the least incident would arouse it altogether.

The room was sumptuously furnished. Everything was new—and the most exquisite taste had superintended the appointments and decorations of that nuptial chamber. The cheeks of the Princess were slightly flushed;—and she looked really beautiful as she reposed in that bridal bed. There was a halo of innocence—a perfume of chastity about the fair sleeper, which would have ravished the heart of any man of honourable, generous, and delicate feeling.

Her moist red lips were slightly apart, revealing the pearls which lay beneath—those brilliant teeth that Lady Jersey had dared to decry! A soft dimple on the rounded chin gave an air of girlish sweetness to the whole countenance. One well-shaped arm, white as alabaster, lay outside the coverlid: the snowy night-dress, open in front, revealed the bosom rich in its glowing yet virgin contours.

The mellow lustre of the lamps in the bridal chamber gave just sufficient light and warmth to render the place a fitting sanctuary for love. The fire had died away in the grate; and the atmosphere was of a pleasant temperature. The curtains shaded the couch, save where the head of the Princess lay upon the luxurious pillow; and with the gentle and regular respiration to which her bosom rose and fell as if in long, measured, stifled sighs, the hue of the rose deepened or grew lighter upon her cheeks.

Suddenly a sound reached her ears—and she half started up in the couch. Her eyes were instinctively flung towards the door, upon the threshold of which she beheld her husband, the Prince of Wales. A deep blush instantaneously suffused her cheeks—and, with a natural modesty, she was about to veil her countenance behind the curtain, when it struck her all in a moment that she had caught a glimpse of *another* countenance in the door-way. An irresistible impulse caused the Princess to dart a second look in that direction ere she shrank behind the drapery of the couch;—and her eyes met those of the Countess of Jersey just at the moment as her ladyship was actually pushing the heir-apparent into the chamber. Then, at that instant,—transitory as was this meeting of their eyes,—it struck the Princess that the countenance of Lady Jersey wore an expression of fiendish triumph and diabolical joy that made *her* absolutely hideous for the instant, and carried a panic to the soul of the Princess.

As if experiencing the blow of a sudden consternation, the affrighted Caroline fell back upon the pillow—while a sensation at the heart and a bewilderment in the brain sent the influence of a prophetic warning thrillingly throughout her entire being.

At the same moment that she had thus recoiled as it were from the serpent-look which had been flung upon her from the threshold of the bridal-chamber, the door was closed and fastened *outside*: for Lady Jersey was resolved that neither one of the royal couple should have a chance of escaping from the companionship of the other, until it suited her purpose to allow such egress. Her object was to inspire them with a mutual disgust;—and as she tripped lightly away from the door which she had just closed, unto the chamber which had been provided for her in Carlton House, she smiled with an infernal malignity which for a moment made her beauteous countenance resemble that of a fallen angel entering upon the threshold of hell!

Meantime the Prince felt himself suddenly abandoned to all the contingencies of a most awkward predicament, the instant that the door closed behind him. Again did he become slightly sobered—enough to receive and understand the conviction that he was in reality at an advanced stage of intoxication;—and, with that desperate energy which drunken men are sometimes enabled to call to their aid, he said to himself, "By God! I *must* appear sober, at all events!"

Assuming therefore as smiling and intelligent a look as he could possibly command, and steadying himself upon his legs with all his might and main, he advanced slowly and cautiously towards the couch with the intention of saying something flattering and conciliatory to his bride. For the thought now uppermost in his mind was, that he must in any case avert the ignominy, scandal, and shame of having his condition recognised by her Royal Highness.

But as he was traversing the room with a caution as gingerly as if he were proceeding along a tight-rope or walking upon eggs, he suddenly encountered a chair. All his ideas were thrown into confusion in a moment. Stopping short, he stood gazing at the chair in the strangest bewilderment. He strove to collect himself—he had sense enough to make this effort—but he could not immediately succeed. The chair bothered him: he could not make it out—and to his topsy-turvy brain it assumed an appearance as sinister and as ominous as that of the windmills to the fevered imagination of Cervantes' hero.

"Well, I'll be damned if I know who you are, or how the devil—hic—you came here," muttered the Prince at last, as he stood swaying to and fro in front of the high-backed crimson velvet chair which he thus inanely apostrophised.

These words,—the sound of which, and not the sense, alone reached the ears of the Princess—startled her from that consternation into which the look of the Countess of Jersey had thrown her: and now, suddenly recollecting that her husband was in the room, she was seized with a strange fluttering of the heart,—mingled emotions of pain and pleasure, alarm and hope, anxiety and suspense, thus agitating in her bosom.

"Oh! if he would love me," she thought within herself, "I would strive hard to love him in return—notwithstanding——"

But she could not allow the secret silent voice which was speaking in her soul, to finish the sentiment: for the image of the young, the handsome, the absent Bergami rose up in her mind, as if to warn her that she could *not* love another under any circumstances. Then again the reminiscence flashed to her brain that her husband was in the room: but she dared not move—scarcely breathe—much less draw back the curtain which separated him from her view

"This is singular—damnation singular!" growled the Prince, after a pause of nearly a minute: then, plucking up a desperate spirit, he extended his arms towards the chair in order to ascertain *who* or *what* the object of his bewilderment really could be:—but overbalancing himself, he fell forward—upsetting the chair, and rolling ignominiously upon the carpet.

The Princess now gave vent to an ejaculation of alarm—started up—and drew back the curtain. She perceived her royal husband making desperate attempts to regain his legs: but it did not for an instant strike her that he was overcome by liquor. Her immediate and very natural impression was that he had fallen accidentally and had received some serious injury which prevented him from rising. The natural modesty of her sex forbade her from hastening forth to his assistance—for, though his wife according to ecclesiastical ceremony, she was as yet virgin of his embrace;—and still it became more and more evident to her that the Prince could not recover his legs unaided.

"Oh! what can I do?—shall I ring the bell?" she exclaimed, clutching at the cord of silk and gold which hung within reach.

"No—no—I—I'm all right—hic!" stammered forth the Prince, as he renewed his desperate attempts to raise himself up by means of the overturned chair.

"But you are injured—seriously injured, I fear," said the kind-hearted Caroline, as far as ever from suspecting the real condition of the bridegroom.

"Don't be—hic—uneasy," faultered his Royal Highness, getting up as far as a kneeling posture. "I'm overcome by—hic—my fee—ee—lings——"

And as he spoke he made another tremendous effort to recover his legs. It was completely successful: but the impetus given to his locomotive inclination, sent him staggering on for a few paces—and a heavy lurch brought him in violent contact with the bed. He had sense enough at the time to feel that he would give worlds to be enabled to save

himself: but he could not—and in this manner was he precipitated as it were, by his own unmanageable condition, upon the bosom of the bride!

Caroline was now more seriously alarmed than before. She had too much keenness of perception to fancy for a single instant that her royal husband had flung himself into her arms in obedience to the rapture of an enthusiastic affection;—and she could no longer believe that he was hurt by his fall over the chair, it being pretty evident that he had no broken limbs. Her ideas and conjectures being thus suddenly diverted into another channel, the thought flashed to her mind that the Prince must be overcome by liquor rather than by his feelings;—and as at that very instant he raised his head from her bosom, where it had remained pillowed for half a minute, a whiff of his vinous breath blew upon her face.

An inexpressible sensation of loathing seized upon the unfortunate lady—her heart heaved against the disgusting beast who was now endeavouring to sooth her with his caresses—and her very soul revolted against the idea of a closer and more intimate contact with her swinish bridegroom. With a natural impulse, therefore, she pushed him away—at the same time that she burst into a flood of tears. The royal voluptuary rolled once more upon the carpet; and the bride, burying her head in the pillow of the nuptial couch, gave way to that outpouring of grief which it was impossible for her to control!

Merciful God! was this the first gentleman in Europe—the most polished Prince in all the world? It has been said that no man is a hero to his valet-de-chambre: it has likewise been said that if our forefathers were taken off their stilts, they would appear very despicable beings indeed. And most assuredly are these assertions correct;—and it may be safely added that if Royalty be only seen in its privacy—stripped of the pomp which invests it with a false grandeur and the frippery which supplies it with an adventitious brilliancy—it will in ninety-nine instances out of a hundred sink below the level of pity and merit only contempt. Such would have been the case with George Prince of Wales, even in his sober moments: but when we behold him reduced to the filthy condition in which he dared to seek the chamber of his innocent virgin bride, we can only observe that it needed but this one act of cowardly brutality to crown all the infamy of his antecedent career.

Hours passed—the lamps had burned out—the morning had dawned some time—but the thick window-curtains excluded the light from the nuptial chamber. The Prince awoke—and the first sensation which he experienced was that of an icy chill all over. He stretched out his arms: one hand encountered the bed-post—the other a chair overturned. Strange and alarming recollections began to dawn in upon his brain;—and the racking headache which he felt was no insignificant evidence of their truth. A deeper and more searching chill than that which he had previously experienced, penetrated into his very heart's core as the damning conviction settled in his mind that he had been steeped to the very eyes in ebriety on the previous night. And if there were any doubt still remaining upon this point, it was speedily dissipated by the ignominious certainty that his Royal Highness was lying upon the carpet by the side of the nuptial couch!

Yes—he had fallen asleep where he had last tumbled down;—and the morning air had imparted to his whole frame that chill which he experienced upon awaking. Loathing himself—loathing his bride — loathing the whole world, the wretched Prince rose as noiselessly as he could from the floor; and, leaning over the couch, he listened in breathless silence. The low respiration which met his ear reassured him on one point: the Princess was sleeping *there!* She had not quitted the chamber in disgust—she had not abandoned him in mingled indignation and loathing: it was therefore yet possible to rescue the adventures of the bridal night from exposure and himself from the consequent ridicule, disgrace, and infamy.

Somewhat consoled by this reflection, the Prince groped his way to the window and drew aside the curtains. The golden lustre of day now streamed into the nuptial chamber; and his Royal Highness ventured to look at himself in the mirror standing upon the toilette-table. Ah! well might he shrink back with deeper loathing than ever: for, behold! the frill of his shirt, the white silk waistcoat, and the lappels of the exquisitely-cut dress-coat which he wore, were all stained and incrusted with the contents of his stomach, vomited during his sleep!

Hastily tearing off the offensive garments and slipping on an elegant dressing-gown, the Prince approached the couch. Caroline was sleeping upon a pillow still wet with the tears of burning anguish which she had shed. Slumber had fallen upon her through the sheer exhaustion of her physical and mental energies;—and the sobbings, in the midst of which the unhappy Princess had sunk into sleep, continued to break her respiration at short intervals. There was an expression of sadness upon her countenance—and it was easy to perceive that the thoughts which now filled her mind in the form of a dream, were of a profoundly infelicitous character.

While the heir-apparent was yet gazing upon her and wondering what would be the result of the outrageous brutality involved in his conduct of the past night, the Princess of Wales awoke with a sudden start—and her eyes instantaneously met those of her husband!

CHAPTER CLXXXI.

THE MORNING AFTER THE BRIDAL NIGHT.

His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales could not possibly feel otherwise than overwhelmed with confusion. The waking-up had been so sudden that he had no time to slip away from the side of the bed ere his looks encountered those of the Princess.

Then to his mind flashed the conviction,—rapid as the glance of lightning athwart the sky,—that whatever might be his sentiments towards his bride—however deeply he loathed and abhorred this marriage into which circumstances had forced him,—he nevertheless had no right to treat that inoffensive and innocent woman with the most cowardly indignity and the most scandalous outrage.

Moreover, he felt all the littleness and all the degradation of the position in which he had placed himself. A man does not chose to have his pride wounded even in the presence of one whom he either

hates or for whom he entertains the most contemptuous indifference: but the annoyance is far greater when the humiliation is self-inflicted. The Prince knew that Caroline had seen him in the most disgusting and repulsive phase of his character,—had seen him in the swinish loathsomeness of a drunken debauchee,—had seen him in a state when he might have given utterance to any language however filthy, or performed pranks however ridiculous. He therefore felt that he was stripped of all his dignity, alike as a Prince and as a Man, in her presence; and it was the most humiliating incident of his life—the most galling moment of his existence—when she suddenly awoke and lifted her eyes towards his countenance!

And what were the emotions—what were the feelings—what were the sentiments of the Princess herself? A burning blush suffused her cheeks—overspread her neck—descended to her bosom,—a blush of natural modesty mingled with indignation, when she beheld her husband standing by the bedside, and then at the same instant recollected the occurrences of the past night. But her anger was only transitory: the goodness of her disposition suddenly lulled it altogether, as oil subdues the fury of the waves;—and the thought flashed to her mind that her husband was *there* to offer his excuses for the state of ebriety in which he had sought the nuptial chamber a few hours previously. This sentiment on her part was quite natural: it was indeed a homage to the presumed refinement and vaunted polish of the Prince's character;—and *she* as a lady judged *him* as a gentleman.

Then was it that the true generosity of her disposition shone forth in all its amiable artlessness—in all its ingenuous beauty—in all its unsophisticated innocence. She loved him not—and yet she felt for him: she entertained not the slightest particle of affection for him—and yet she could not bear to think that he should stand humiliated, abashed, and ashamed in her presence. Nay—she had even every possible motive to abhor and loath him: but her sentiments were all of that truly forgiving nature which characterised her sex in general and herself in particular.

O Woman! vile, degraded, and unworthy the name of Man must that individual be, who could treat thee with disrespect:—but worse, ten thousand times worse than the most savage brute or the most venomous reptile is he who could bear himself towards thee with a coward and a barbarian cruelty!

The countenance of her Royal Highness the Princess of Wales expanded all in a moment into the sweetest smiles: the beneficence of paradise shed its illumination upon those fair features:—and, half raising herself in the nuptial couch, she extended her hand towards the heir-apparent, exclaiming in the softest music of her silver tones, "My lord—my husband—my Prince—if you mean an apology, I want none—will have none!"

Coldly did the royal barbarian take that hand, which he scarcely pressed even for a single instant: then, dropping it abruptly, and with a dogged sternness of countenance and severity of manner, he said, "I thank your Royal Highness for having made me sensible that you fully appreciate the enormity of my offence, but that you are generous enough to forgive it."

"Is it possible that I have done wrong?" cried the Princess, grieved and alarmed by the words and bearing of her husband.

"Since you do not choose to lay any specific charge against me, madam," responded the Prince, in the same strain of cold heartlessness, "it is not likely that I should level any accusation against you. But it would be as well, under existing circumstances, if we understood each other rightly on certain matters. I therefore crave the attention of your Royal Highness for a few minutes!"

And, putting back the curtain, the heir-apparent seated himself by the side of the couch,—while the Princess gazed upon him in mingled wonderment and dismay.

"You are aware, madam," resumed the unfeeling bridegroom, "that our union has been one of convention—and not of love;—one of policy—and not of affection. I do not expect that you could have entertained any regard for me, even though the most flattering representations had been made to you concerning my personal appearance, my manners, my intelligence, my disposition, and my conduct. At all events, I am not vain nor foolish enough to suppose that even if you had experienced any good feeling on my behalf, it could possibly have survived the incidents of the past night. On the other hand, I will frankly admit that I experience no tender sentiment towards yourself. That you may be worthy of the highest esteem, the most devoted friendship, and the most ardent love, I will not question for a single instant: but I beg you to remember that we frail and erring mortals have no control over our own inclinations. Let us, then, admit—mutually admit—that there exists no love between us—and that there never can exist any! By thus looking our position in the face, we at once grapple with a difficulty which, if we avoid it now, will only force itself upon our notice with a more crushing effect hereafter. The result of all this reasoning on my part, is to bring your mind to recognise the necessity of our coming to a prompt understanding with each other."

"And that understanding?" gasped the Princess inquiringly, as she still remained gazing in mingled astonishment and terror upon the husband who was thus addressing her in a style of deliberate, cold-blooded, and systematic heartlessness.

"Ah! that understanding," repeated his Royal Highness: "well—it is for me to be as explicit, as frank, and as candid as circumstances demand. Look you, madam—your position is somewhat altered by your elevation to the rank of a British Princess; and you will no doubt see ample reason to experience the liveliest gratitude at the change."

"Are you serious?—or is this a pure mockery?" demanded Caroline, her indignation now rising once more.

"I never was more serious in my life," answered the heir-apparent: "and, upon my soul! I wish to say nothing to wound your feelings. I even deplore the necessity which compels me thus to speak out. But what are the facts? The other day you were a comparatively unknown and obscure Princess, belonging to a petty German Court the name of which was not over familiar even to persons tolerably well versed in geographical knowledge. Now you are the Princess of Wales—your name is already written in the grand page of England's history. You have become the envy of myriads and myriads of high-born dames and titled

ladies;—and you will shine, if you choose, as the central star of the most splendid galaxy of rank, wealth, fashion, and aristocratic influence, upon the face of the earth. Surely, then, this is a position for which you may feel grateful: it is almost the highest to which human ambition could possibly aspire—and even *the higher one* will some day be yours also. Well, madam—you are now Princess of Wales—and in due time you may become Queen of England. Let all this suffice you. Content yourself with the brilliancy and the grandeur of this position—enjoy yourself as you will—be entirely your own mistress—and, in return, leave *me* to be as entirely my own master!"

The Princess Caroline fell back upon her pillow—covered her countenance with her hands—and strove to collect her thoughts. She seemed as if she were walking in a dream—or endeavouring to follow some object that was guiding her through a mist. Athwart the cloudy confusion of her ideas she fancied that she caught a scintillation of the Prince's real meaning: but she was too much bewildered to fix her mental gaze steadily upon it and assure herself that she did really comprehend its true nature.

"Do you understand me?" demanded his Royal Highness, after a long pause.

"No. You must explain yourself more fully," she replied, with the curtness of an intense agitation which she vainly struggled to subdue.

"I mean, then," resumed the heir-apparent, in a tone of vexation, "that *after* the honeymoon you will consent to exist as my wife only in name, and that you will not attempt the slightest interference with my pursuits or my pleasures."

"Ah! I can consent to *that*, provided that the repudiation be not public," said the Princess, her mind suddenly relieved from a cruel anxiety. "I thought, in the first instance, that you were about to propose a complete separation;—and I would retire from the world altogether—seek the profoundest solitude—or even fly from existence itself, rather than be divorced the very day after my marriage. For, alas! the world would put its own construction upon such an event——"

"We need not discuss that point, madam," interposed the heir-apparent,—"since I have assured you that I contemplate nothing of the sort. No: it is my wish, as much as it can be yours, that we should sustain the conventionalities of married life. In public you will receive from me the attention and respect due to a wife: in private you will tutor yourself to exercise all possible forbearance. Upon this understanding we may avoid an open rupture—we may even become friends——"

"It is for you to dictate, and for me to obey," said the Princess, in a tone of real and unaffected meekness.

"Ah! but what I want you to do, madam," cried the heir-apparent, "is to pledge yourself—solemnly pledge yourself—that you will keep your own counsel and make no confidants. You must not speak ill of me in the letters which you write home to Germany—nor when the King asks you from time to time whether you are happy—nor when you are in private and familiar discourse with my sisters—nor in any unguarded moment, amongst the ladies who will become your acquaintances——"

"Oh! I will keep everything treasured up in my own heart," exclaimed Caroline. "Have you any farther commands to give me?"

"Do you address that question to me in seriousness or in mockery?" cried the Prince, turning his looks completely upon the Princess, who had just withdrawn her hands from over her countenance.

"I know not why your Royal Highness should suspect me of duplicity, in language, in manner, or in thought," was the mild and gentle remonstrance. "I did not expect to win your love—but I did not despair of obtaining your confidence. To everything you *have* proposed, I assent: to everything you *may* propose, I shall likewise assent—provided that you do naught to disgrace me publicly. I have now nothing but my good intentions—my fair fame—and my own rectitude of conduct to enable me to secure the regard of the British people——"

"A fig for their regard!" ejaculated the Prince, contemptuously. "The British people are born to be the slaves of their Sovereigns—the serfs of their rulers—the 'hewers of wood and drawers of water' for the high-born and great;—and so long as they remain quiet, we give them credit for loyalty. When they show any manifestation of discontent, we set the Attorney-General to work—and he soon sends the ringleaders to the gibbet or the hulks. If *that* won't do, then we treat the people with a few charges of cavalry—or may be a dose of cannon balls;—and when we have completely put them down, we proclaim to the world that the rebels have returned to their allegiance. That is the way we manage matters in this country;—and therefore you need not trouble yourself for a single moment about the people's regard. But, to return to the topic most interesting to ourselves," exclaimed his Royal Highness,—"do we now perfectly understand each other?"

"I at least understand the wishes that you have expressed," said Caroline; "and you have received the assurance of my readiness to comply with them."

"And you pledge yourself to implicit secrecy with regard to this compact?" observed the heir-apparent.

"I will make no pledge of so solemn a nature unless you give me one in return," said the Princess, after a few moments' pause, during which the natural dignity of her sex began to assert its empire.

"And what pledge do you demand?" inquired the Prince, somewhat startled by the sudden display of spirit on the part of her whom a moment before he had looked upon as a soft, silly fool easily modelled to his own will, and equally easy to be crushed altogether.

"I demand your most solemn and sacred promise that you will never inflict upon me any public disgrace, nor subject me to any humiliation which may become patent to the eyes of the world?"—and the Princess enunciated these terms in a more decided voice and with a more resolute manner than she had previously ventured to assume throughout this painful interview.

"I give you the pledge you require," said the heir-apparent: and he repeated the words in which she had expressed herself. "Now you will ratify your own portion of our compact with an equal solemnity?"

"Yes—unhesitatingly," replied the Princess. "I vow, then, to keep my own council—to make no

complaints either in writing or in speaking—and to attempt the exercise of no authority over you. Will that suffice?"

"You have fully comprehended my meaning," was the prompt reply. "During the usual period of what is vulgarly—and, I suppose, facetiously—called the honeymoon, I shall become the partner of your chamber: afterwards, I regain my liberty and act as my own master. And now you must permit me to observe that I am grateful for the readiness with which you have entered into my views and assented to my wishes. Nay, more—you must even permit me to apologise for my conduct of the past night;—and I can assure you that when the hour for retiring to rest shall again come round, I will not seek your chamber in a condition as repulsive to yourself as it is humiliating to me."

Thus speaking, the Prince of Wales rose from his seat—made a graceful bow—and retired into his dressing-room.

"And it is for this that I have become Princess of Wales?" murmured Caroline to herself, the instant that she was left alone. "Oh! that I had never consented to leave my native land—never allowed myself to be persuaded by my parents to accept the hand of a foreign Prince! But let me not repine: no—no," she said in a hoarse whisper, as she pressed her fingers to her throbbing brows; "let me not repine! Resignation—meekness—docility—and endurance will best become me now. Never, never was woman placed in a position so difficult. The least error—and I shall be lost! Oh! he already wishes to rid himself of me—and we have not yet been married a day! Would that I had some kind friend to counsel me—some disinterested monitor to guide me now!"

And as the unfortunate Princess covered her countenance with her fair hands, the tears trickled between her taper fingers.

Presently she heard the key turning in the outer door of the chamber: and, hastily wiping her eyes, she assumed as much composure as she could possibly summon to her aid. The next moment Lady Jersey entered the room; and with an air of profound respect, she approached the couch. A glance convinced her that only *one* person had lain in that nuptial bed; and *she* was still there. For an instant—a single instant—did a smile of triumph waver upon the lips of the Countess: but it was gone the very next moment—and Caroline observed it not.

"Good morning, dear Lady Jersey," said the Princess, replying with unaffected frankness to the ceremonial salutation with which the Countess greeted her. "Did you not revisit the chamber for a moment last night—or rather, at an early hour this morning?—I mean, when his Royal Highness——"

"According to the prescribed custom, may it please your Royal Highness," observed Lady Jersey, "I accompanied the illustrious bridegroom to the threshold——"

"And did you not regard me in a very peculiar manner?" demanded Caroline. "Now, unless I was dreaming at the moment, it struck me that there was a very angry expression upon your countenance; and this was wrong on your part,—inasmuch as I had already assured you that I am in no way jealous of your friendship with the Prince—and I had even made the same representation to him relative to yourself."

"Oh! your Royal Highness must not imagine for a moment," exclaimed Lady Jersey, her countenance becoming scarlet, "that I should dare to assume in your presence any other mien than that of the profoundest respect. When I accompanied his Royal Highness as far as the threshold of this chamber, I saw that you recognised me, and I saluted your Royal Highness with an inclination of the head—perhaps accompanied with a smile of the most respectful devotedness."

"Ah! then the light must have deceived me," said Caroline.

"Assuredly, your Royal Highness," observed the artful patrician lady. "I hope that when you know me better, you will learn to regard me as one of your sincerest and firmest friends."

"Is it possible that you will become my friend, Jersey?" exclaimed the Princess, as much delighted as astonished at the assurance.

"It would be the height of my ambition and the crowning of my happiness," was the immediate response. "But so long as your Royal Highness puts faith in the vile calumnies which are whispered concerning myself, and which have evidently reached your ears——"

"Calumnies!" ejaculated the Princess, in astonishment. "I have heard no calumnies relative to you."

"Then to what did your Royal Highness allude when you spoke so significantly of a presumed friendship between the Prince and myself?" inquired the Countess, now unfeignedly surprised in her turn.

"Oh! do you call those calumnies?" exclaimed the Princess. "I thought that you English ladies were too proud and happy at being the Prince's mistresses, to look upon the reports thereof as calumnies?"

The Countess once more blushed up to the eyes—and averted her head: but when she had somewhat recovered from her confusion, she threw a rapid, searching glance upon Caroline to read in her looks what was passing in her soul.

"Your Royal Highness has altogether mistaken *me* and been misled by those rumours which I more vehemently than ever denounce as calumnies," said Lady Jersey, convinced by Caroline's manner that she was altogether serious in her remarks and entertained not even the remotest idea of sarcastic allusion.

"Would you have me believe that you are not the Prince's mistress?" she demanded, surveying Lady Jersey with mingled astonishment and incredulity.

"Should I dare offer your Royal Highness the humble tribute of my most devoted friendship, if there were any impropriety of such a nature in my conduct?" said Lady Jersey, affecting the virtuous indignation of a woman outraged by a foul calumny. "No, your Royal Highness—I have been belied; and I implore you to believe that such is indeed the truth."

"I dare not doubt you, my dear Jersey," said Caroline: "you have no inducement to deceive me. I was prepared to like you even while imagining you to be the Prince's mistress: how much more shall I love you, now that I have been assured of the contrary? Give me your hand: henceforth we will be true and faithful friends to each other."

"Dear Princess—as amiable as you are beautiful!" murmured the false woman, pressing Caroline's hand

LADY JERSEY.

to her lips and pretending to be deeply affected. "Believe me when I declare that your Royal Highness will have no friend more devoted, more faithful, more loving than myself; and if you should deign to make me your confidant—because all great Princesses like you have confidants to whom they unbosom their secrets——"

"But suppose there are secrets which their husbands have enjoined them not to reveal?" interjected the artless Caroline.

"Then for that very reason they must be sure and act contrary to their husband's commands," was the audacious response which the Countess at once hazarded.

"And why so?" inquired the Princess, her air suddenly becoming pensive.

"Because the confidant in such a case will tell the Princess whether the husband's motive was a worthy one in enjoining the particular secret to be kept," said the Countess. "Husbands are not immaculate, even though they be princes;—and since your Royal Highness has deigned to distinguish me with your friendship, I am bound to give you honest, candid, and ingenuous counsel."

"Oh! heaven knows I require it badly enough!" exclaimed Caroline, clasping her hands fervently.

"Your Royal Highness will find no flatterer, but a truthful and plain-speaking confidant in me," returned the Countess: "that is to say," she immediately added, "if I am really to consider myself a confidant as well as a friend."

"Assuredly—most assuredly," observed the Princess, altogether thrown off her guard by the air of sincerity and well-intentioned frankness which the hypocritical woman was such an adept at assuming. "But whatever secrets I may reveal to you——"

"Will remain entombed in my own breast," added Lady Jersey. "Your Royal Highness must know that at the English Court, and likewise in a princely household such as this, there are invariably two par-

ties: one is the party for the King or Prince, as the case may be—and the other is the party for the Queen or Princess. There will consequently soon be two parties in Carlton House—and I am glad that the friendship vouchsafed to me by your Royal Highness has at once determined me which side to take."

"Then you will be as it were opposed to the Prince?" exclaimed Caroline, ingenuously.

"Not exactly opposed to him—because these parties are not precisely hostile to each other," explained Lady Jersey: "but they serve as camarillas or secret councils to each exalted personage. Nevertheless, even were I obliged to oppose the Prince in any sense of the term, I should not hesitate to do so provided I was consulting the veritable interests of your Royal Highness."

"Then, after all, the Prince is really no favourite of your's?" cried her Royal Highness.

"Far from it," responded Lady Jersey. "Do you wish me to be candid?"

"I do," said Caroline. "Speak openly—undisguisedly."

"Then must your Royal Highness now learn that I hate the Prince of Wales," answered the Countess, throwing an accent of deep and concentrated acerbity into her tone.

"You hate him!" repeated Caroline, in wonderment. "Then why did you accept a post about my person which would compel you to take up your residence beneath the roof of Carlton House?"

"Because I already loved you before I even saw you," was the immediate reply, delivered with such an air of affectionate sincerity that the Princess, naturally warm and enthusiastic, threw her arms round Lady Jersey's neck and covered her cheeks with kisses and with tears.

"But tell me wherefore you hate my royal husband?" inquired the confiding, unsuspecting Caroline when she had thus lavished the proofs of her gratitude and friendship upon the false woman who was thus successfully entangling her in the inextricable meshes of a profound duplicity.

"I hate the Prince of Wales," replied Lady Jersey, assuming the air of an outraged woman conscious of integrity,—"because he would have seduced me into that path which calumny represents me to be treading. O Princess!" exclaimed the accomplished hypocrite, throwing into her voice all the tremulousness and into her manner all the excitement of deep emotion; "I am innocent of any wrong—and yet *your husband* has caused me to be regarded as a faithless wife! Can I do otherwise than hate him?"

"Alas! alas! it is very sad," murmured Caroline, the tears trickling down her cheeks. "But I will endeavour to recompense you for the injury which you have thus sustained at the hands of him who is now my husband——"

"Your friendship and your confidence will amply reward me, dear Princess," hastily exclaimed the artful lady.

"And you shall have *both!*" rejoined Caroline, in a fervid tone. "Nevertheless," she continued, suddenly recollecting herself, "there were certain things which the Prince said to me just now and, relative to which he exacted a solemn vow of secrecy——"

"Oh! is it possible that his Royal Highness should have commenced the work of coercion, intimidation, or tyranny with you?" exclaimed Lady Jersey, affecting the deepest sorrow and surprise "Alas! poor Princess——But you will pardon me——"

"Pardon you, dear Jersey!" ejaculated Caroline. "What have you done to offend me? You are speaking to me with the purest motives and in the kindest sense——"

"Yes, dear Princess," interrupted the treacherous woman,—"and you must repose implicit confidence in me—for I perceive that dangers are already overclouding the sky of your existence. It would be wrong,—nay—it would be folly—madness—to observe pledges extorted by menace, or to adhere to vows wrung from you at a moment when you exercised not a proper command over yourself. Besides, if you regard me in the light of a confidant—and as I shall retain inviolable all the communications you may impart to me—there can be no possible harm in your revealing the secrets to which you allude. You *must* consult me with regard to them—for I already perceive that they involve matters seriously affecting your happiness and your welfare:—but it is utterly impossible that I can tender any advice until I know all—everything without reserve——"

"You *shall* know all—everything," said Caroline, in a tone of decision: for she was now completely enmeshed in the toils which the duplicity and speciousness, the treachery and false friendship of Lady Jersey had been gradually yet surely weaving around her.

But scarcely was that promise of entire confidence given, when the door opened, and Mrs. Harvey Aston and Mrs. Harcourt entered the room.

"Not another word upon that subject *now*, dear Princess," said Lady Jersey, leaning forward over the bed and speaking in a low rapid whisper: "we will shortly seize an opportunity to converse at our leisure."

"Be it so, my dearest friend," responded Caroline, in the same subdued tone;—and the unsuspecting Princess felt her heart leap at the idea that she had secured the love, devotion, and fidelity of a woman whom she now looked upon as the most generous-hearted as well as the most calumniated of her sex!

Her Royal Highness now rose from the virgin nuptial couch, and submitted herself to the operations of the toilette.

CHAPTER CLXXXII.

THE EX-BAGMAN AT CARLTON HOUSE.

IMMEDIATELY after breakfast, the Prince of Wales repaired to his own private apartment,—that splendidly-furnished chamber where we have already so often seen him, and with which the secret staircase communicated.

He wished to be alone—or at all events with no other companionship than his own thoughts: for he loathed himself—loathed his present position—loathed the whole world, in fine;—and he was precisely in one of those humours when the mind, bordering upon misanthropy, finds a sort of relief in solitude.

But his Royal Highness was not destined to be left long undisturbed: for Germain shortly made

his appearance with the announcement that a certain Mr. Page craved an audience upon matters which he alleged to be of some importance.

"Page—Page?" murmured the Prince, with mingled impatience and curiosity. "Surely I should know that name? What sort of a looking man is he, Germain?"

"About forty-five or forty-six, may it please your Royal Highness," was the reply: "thin countenance—angular features—sallow complexion—restless eyes——"

"The bagman, to be sure!" ejaculated the Prince. "I recollect the fellow now. But what can he want with me?"

"He says that he shall not detain your Royal Highness a minute," observed the French valet; "and that he can communicate something which it is advisable your Royal Highness should know."

"Well—I will see him," said the Prince, after a moment's consideration: then, so soon as Germain had quitted the apartment, he muttered to himself, "This man Page is a shrewd, cunning, and active kind of a fellow. I saw enough of him on two occasions to satisfy me of *that*. The first was the memorable adventure of the George and Blue Boar: the other was at Stamford Manor. But what on earth can he want with me?—and what can he have to communicate?"

Thus musing, the Prince paced the room; and in a few minutes the ex-bagman was introduced into the royal presence. Germain withdrew; and Mr. Page, who was attired in the most fashionable style, and whose appearance and manners combined the servility of a waiter at a Bond Street Hotel with the affected dandyism of a Burlington Arcade hair-dresser, confounded himself in bows and scrapings as he advanced towards the Prince.

"Well, Mr. Page, what do you want with me?" demanded his Royal Highness, impatiently.

"I cannot explain myself in a moment, great Prince," said the ex-bagman; "and your Royal Highness must bear with me. In fact, permit me to recover my breath, which the honour and pleasure of mounting all those marble steps have quite taken away."

And Mr. Page gave a couple of long gasps as he thus spoke.

"Now, then, perhaps you will enlighten me respecting the purport of your visit?" said the Prince, after waiting patiently—or rather with suppressed impatience—for upwards of a minute.

"I will come to the point in a moment, may it please your Royal Highness," resumed Page. "But I think I ought to observe, by way of preface—prologue—or introduction, that I am a man of sound discretion and consummate prudence,—seeing and hearing in reality everything that takes place around me—but ostensibly neither seeing nor hearing anything more than is precisely suitable——"

"I understand you, Mr. Page," observed the Prince, drily: "in fact, you are a man of the world—and that is saying everything."

"So it is, your Royal Highness—so it is!" exclaimed the bowing sycophant. "On the first occasion that I had the honour to come in contact with your Royal Highness, the adventure was ludicrous enough. I took your Royal Highness for Sir Richard Stamford, and chased your Royal Highness up the Edgeware Road——"

"Well, well, sir," cried the Prince, impatiently.

"Oh! your Royal Highness has since forgiven me for that affair," exclaimed Page. "You remember, great Prince—on the second occasion when I had the honour to meet your Royal Highness—at Stamford Manor—about six weeks ago—when your Royal Highness was accompanied by the beautiful and brilliant Duchess of Devonshire——"

"How, sir?—you discovered who that lady was?—you knew her, then, at the time?" ejaculated the Prince, angrily.

"Now do you give me credit for discretion, may it please your Royal Highness?" cried Mr. Page, in a manner humbly deprecatory of the royal wrath. "The circumstance has never passed the lips of either myself or Julia—that is to say, Mrs. Page——"

"Ah! and you knew that it was the Duchess—eh?" said the Prince, in a musing tone. "Well, you are certainly the most accomplished hypocrite and the most finished dissembler I ever encountered in all my life: for I could have sworn that you entertained not the faintest suspicion of who the lady really was. But, come, Mr. Page—be frank and candid, and we shall not continue the less friendly," said his Royal Highness, in a coaxing style: "did you actually know from the very first moment who she was?—or have you discovered the secret since?"

"Of what import can the explanation possibly be to your Royal Highness," demanded Page,—"seeing that I *do* know who the lady is—and that therefore it all comes to the same thing in the end?"

"It only matters thus far," responded the Prince, in a tone of mingled hauteur and contempt,—"that you seem to be beating about the bush a great deal; and I am therefore anxious to obtain an insight into what is passing in your mind, since you do not appear disposed to vouchsafe an explanation."

"Pardon me, great Prince," said Page, with a low bow: "I have no sinister purpose in view. If I alluded to past incidents, it was merely to convince your Royal Highness, upon the testimony which they furnish, that I am as keen as I am trustworthy—as sharp as I am prudent—as penetrating as I am wary. And if your Royal Highness were not to be thus made acquainted with my true character, you would wonder how on earth I could possibly come to know anything about the beautiful but unhappy Octavia Clarendon."

"Octavia Clarendon!" echoed the Prince, turning pale and staggering as if struck with a sudden pang at the heart: then, instantaneously recovering himself, as he saw the ex-bagman's keen eyes fixed searchingly upon him, he said in a tone of assumed indifference, "What have you to tell me concerning Miss Clarendon?"

"Not much—but still enough to render it necessary to be communicated to your Royal Highness," answered Mr. Page. "The long and short of the matter is that I have recently moved into a nice little house in the Edgeware Road—Paradise Villas the place is called——"

"Ah! that is where the Clarendons used to live," exclaimed the Prince.

"And where the two young ladies live *now*," rejoined Page.

"Indeed!" cried the heir-apparent, his heart bounding with joy at thus discovering the abode of Pauline. "Is it possible that the sisters have returned to their old residence?"

"It is so possible, may it please your Royal Highness," answered the sententious Mr. Page, "that I have seen them there with my own eyes—heard them with my own ears—and spoken to them with my own tongue. And what makes the thing more curious, is that Paradise Villas stand just at that part of the Edgeware Road where your Royal Highness disappeared so singularly from the yellow hackney-coach on the memorable night that I chased you under the impression of your being the Aylesbury baronet. But, ah! if the Miss Clarendons were living in Paradise Villas at the time," added Mr. Page, with a sly look, "I can now understand why your Royal Highness was visiting the neighbourhood that night, and where it was that you found a most pleasant refuge."

"And so the sisters have returned to their former home?" said the heir-apparent, in a musing strain—so that all the latter portion of the speech just delivered by Mr. Page was completely lost upon his Royal Highness. "Ah! I can penetrate full easily into the motives of that sly puss, Miss Pauline," he continued to mutter to himself, as he walked to the window and then back to the fire-place, in front of which he resumed the lounging position he had just quitted: "she thought to escape me altogether—to throw me completely out of all possible calculations respecting her whereabouts! And upon my soul, it was excellently managed! No one would have thought of looking for her in her former home. Well, my good fellow," said the Prince aloud, once more turning to Mr. Page, "and what have you got to communicate to me relative to these Miss Clarendons?"

"Your Royal Highness must be informed in the first instance," replied the ex-bagman, "that I happen to have taken a house next door to those young ladies. Now if I have a failing of my own, it is that I am inquisitive: and if I have the bump of perseverance, it assuredly is justified by the unweariedness with which I pursue any particular object that interests me. Well, the very day I entered my new house—accompanied by Mrs. Page, be it understood—I inquired who were my next-door neighbours. The answers were soon given. On my right hand dwelt the Reverend Mr. Sneaksby, lately removed from Jermyn Street, as I understood: and on my left hand were the Misses Clarendon. Well, may it please your Royal Highness, I soon discovered that my neighbour Sneaksby is a canting humbug—saving your Royal Highness's presence—who gets drunk with a red-faced hypocrite called Paxwax, and who keeps a very pretty servant-girl named Ann Jones——"

"Well—but it is about the Miss Clarendons that you wish to speak to me, I fancied?" interjected the Prince, who could scarcely prevent himself from knocking Mr. Page down, so great was his impatience, and so wearied was he of the ex-bagman's circumlocutory style.

"To be sure it is," cried Page, with as much self-possession as if he had never deviated for a single moment from the point. "In the same manner that I gleaned within a few hours as much as there was to know respecting Mr. Sneaksby, did I ascertain as much as it was possible to discover about the two beautiful sisters dwelling on my left hand. So I learnt that they were the daughters of Lord Holderness, who has very recently married again—that the elder, Miss Octavia, was not altogether right in her mind—that the younger, Miss Pauline, was like an angel to her unfortunate sister—and that they lived in the strictest seclusion, going nowhere and seeing no one. Well, most illustrious Prince," continued Mr. Page, "I felt particularly anxious to see these girls—and sure enough, in the evening, they went out into the little bit of a garden behind the house. Both were beautiful: but one was pale and had a sad melancholy look—while the other watched her with an earnestness of devotion that actually raised pious thoughts in my mind and made my eyes dim for a moment as if I was half inclined to weep. However—be that as it may—there was no difficulty in discovering which was Octavia, and which was Pauline. I went out into my own garden—the gardens at the back of these villas are only separated by a frail iron railing, bordered on each side by low evergreens; and thus it was easy for me to introduce myself in a neighbourly fashion to the sisters. Besides, I am not a man to stick at trifles when once bent upon a particular object;—and, I don't know how it was, but some strange sentiment of curiosity rivetted my interest upon those young ladies. I accordingly made them a low and most deferential salutation, and passed a comment upon the beauty of the evening. Octavia took no notice of me—she was plunged in the moodiest abstraction: but Pauline answered me with courtesy, though by no means in a manner which gave any encouragement for a prolongation of the discourse. But, Lord bless your Royal Highness! I am not the man to take hints when I don't choose: so I just pushed the conversation far enough to show the young lady that I wanted to get on a neighbourly sort of footing—and then I bade her good night. Well, next evening, I was out in my garden again—and we conversed a little longer. Miss Pauline was not quite so distant—and she could be a sweet amiable girl if she chose! I am sure of *that!*"

"No doubt of it," exclaimed the Prince: "but pray come to the point, and tell me in which way and to what extent all these circumstances are of importance to me."

"I shall have finished my explanations in a few minutes, may it please your Royal Highness," said Mr. Page: "and in order to get as near the end as possible, I will at once observe that after two or three evenings of neighbourly chit-chat from one garden to the other, I ventured to introduce my wife—that is to say, the accomplished and well-looking Mrs. Page whom your Royal Highness saw at Stamford Manor——"

"I recollect perfectly," interrupted the Prince, with ill-concealed impatience. "Pray proceed. You were saying that you introduced Mrs. Page to the two young ladies——"

"Such was the fact," resumed the ex-bagman. "But the Hon. Miss Octavia Clarendon took little or no notice of my good lady—whereas the Hon. Miss Pauline Clarendon appeared rather pleased at the prospect of having some female companionship. And now I must inform your Royal Highness that this introduction of which I am speaking took place on the evening of the 5th instant—to-day, you know, is the 9th——"

"Go on—go on," exclaimed the Prince. "You say that the occurrence of which you are speaking took place on the 5th?" he added, more than half suspecting what was coming.

"It was so, may it please your Royal Highness," continued Page. "And just figure to yourself that me and my wife were standing on the steps leading down from the back-door of *our* house into *our* garden—while Miss Octavia and Miss Pauline were standing a few yards distant, in the gravel-walk of *their* garden. Octavia was leaning upon Pauline's arm; and the setting sun was shining upon the auburn hair of the former and the splendid brown tresses of the latter. I thought to myself that I had never, never seen two such beautiful creatures in all my life! Well, I presented Mrs. Page to them—and, while Octavia stood gazing abstractedly upon a withering rose-bush, Pauline said some civil things to my wife. In fact, that charming Pauline is quite the lady! At first the conversation was naturally and necessarily upon ordinary topics: but all on a sudden, as the thought flashed to my wife's head, she exclaimed, '*By the bye, the young German Princess that the Prince of Wales is to marry, has arrived in London to-day—so the milk-man told me just now.*'—Oh! never, never," continued Mr. Page, his air becoming all in a moment solemnly serious, "shall I forget the effect which those words produced upon Miss Octavia. A half-stifled cry burst from her lips—a deadly pallor come over her—she stared with awful wildness upon my wife—and then sank back, with a low moan, into the arms of Pauline, who had suddenly become almost as excited as herself. Well, what else could I and Mrs. Page do under such circumstances, except what we did do?—and this was to scramble through the evergreens—over the low railings—into the next garden—and bestow all our attentions on the two charming young ladies. Pauline besought us to retire and leave to herself the management of her sister: but I gave Mrs. Page a significant wink—and she accordingly said that she would not for worlds leave the dear creatures in such a plight. So we half carried, half led the Hon. Miss Octavia into the house—the Hon. Miss Pauline assisting us as well as she was able. We placed Octavia on the sofa in the parlour—which, by the bye, is most elegantly furnished——"

"Pause not to touch upon trifles," said the Prince, in a low voice and with half-averted countenance: "but endeavour to adhere to the thread of your narrative."

"Well, please your Royal Highness," continued Mr. Page, "a most interesting scene then ensued. There was Miss Octavia raving after '*her dear Prince*'—'*her beloved Prince*'—'*her handsome George*'——your Royal Highness will pardon me—the words are her's not mine——"

"Go on—go on," exclaimed the heir-apparent, impatiently.

"All kinds of tender names did she bestow upon your Royal Highness," resumed Mr. Page; "while I and my wife were perfectly astounded at the discovery which this scene of course revealed to our comprehension. And Pauline—poor Pauline—was too much occupied in her almost wild, distracted, and despairing endeavours to appease and tranquillise her unhappy sister,—she was too much engaged, I say, in the task of soothing that frenzied mind, to take any farther notice of our presence. Thus we gleaned the whole truth from poor Octavia's ravings: for the wretched young lady called you '*her betrayer*'—'*her seducer*'—'*the author of her ruin*'—'*the father of her as yet unborn babe*'——"

"She said all *that*—did she?" murmured the Prince, in a tone that was scarcely audible: for never, never, in all his life, had he experienced the power of compunction so profoundly, so acutely as at this moment.

"She mingled the tenderest with the harshest names—the most loving epithets with the bitterest accusations," replied Page. "At one moment she invoked vengeance upon your head—at another she expressed her conviction that you would not deceive her: and finally she sank off, through sheer exhaustion, into a deep slumber, with your name hovering tenderly upon her lips. Then Pauline appeared to become aware, for the first time during this lamentable scene, that my wife and myself must have learnt her sister's secret: and, taking us both by the hand, she said, while tears streamed down her cheeks, '*Accident has made you acquainted with my poor sister's misfortune: I conjure you not to betray your knowledge of the cause of her sorrows!*'—Your Royal Highness does not require to be informed that we gave a reassuring answer; and taking leave of poor Pauline, who was overwhelmed with grief, we returned into our own house to discuss all we had seen and heard."

"Have you anything more to communicate to me, Mr. Page?" inquired the Prince.

"To be sure!" ejaculated that mercurially brisk and bustling individual. "I am now coming to the very cream of the whole matter—the point relative to which it is most imperatively necessary for your Royal Highness to be duly warned——"

"Warned!" echoed the heir-apparent, recovering somewhat of his dignified hauteur and casting an almost stern glance upon the ex-bagman. "What danger, sir, can possibly threaten me from *that* quarter? If I made Miss Clarendon my mistress, I also made her father a Peer," he continued, the evanescent remorse which had been excited in his soul now rapidly losing its tensity and indeed relapsing into the cold heartlessness that was habitual with him. "But continue, sir, the observations you have to make."

"I shall not detain your Royal Highness much longer," resumed Mr. Page, now for the first time entertaining a fear that he was a little too prolix. "The incident which I have just related occurred on the 5th: the 6th passed without the young ladies re-appearing in the garden—but I sent my wife to make inquiries. She only saw the servant; and the answer was that Miss Octavia continued poorly, and that Miss Pauline was unable to leave her. The same on the 7th. But on the 8th—which was yesterday, may it please your Royal Highness——"

"I recollect the date well," cried the Prince, in an irrepressible paroxysm of bitterness as he thought of his wedding-day. "Go on, Mr. Page: what occurred yesterday?" he demanded, in a more conciliatory tone.

"It was last evening, may it please your Royal Highness," resumed the ex-bagman. "Soon after dusk, the two sisters went forth into their little garden. Octavia was leaning upon Pauline's arm. Through the deepening gloom of the evening, the former resembled a drooping Muse breathing in gentle accents the history of her sorrows to the ear

of a sister-demigoddess. For she was speaking in the lowest tone—and yet with a continuousness which showed how earnest were her words;—and as I happened to be seated at the time in a little arbour of evergreens at the bottom of my garden, I did not think it necessary to disturb the poor young ladies by letting them know that I was near. I accordingly remained perfectly still;—and of course if I *did* overhear anything that passed between them, it was not my fault. Fancying themselves to be entirely alone, they were discoursing unreservedly, although in a very low voice. Octavia was declaring her resolve to proceed to Carlton House—demand an interview with your Royal Highness—and ascertain your intentions from your own lips. These views she enunciated in a strain which was so collected and rational, that I fancied she must have altogether recovered the full use of her reason. It was evident that Pauline entertained the same idea: for she began to argue with her sister just as one sane person addresses another. She represented the impropriety as well as the inutility of the proposed step: but Octavia was immoveably wedded to her design. The discussion was continued with a calm earnestness on both sides for upwards of a quarter of an hour; and not once during that interval did Octavia give the slightest proof of mental alienation. Nevertheless, she persevered in her resolve to seek an interview with your Royal Highness; and Pauline, evidently becoming alarmed at the determination to which her mind had settled down, and no doubt presuming too much upon its extreme apparent calmness, broke to her the truth—the tremendous truth—that your marriage with her Royal Highness the Princess Caroline was fixed to take place that *very evening*! Then, all in a moment, from the lips of Octavia burst the wildest of cries—and, turning abruptly away from her sister, she fled into the house, exclaiming, '*Give me my cloak—my bonnet—and let me depart to claim my husband, whom a foreign rival is taking away from me!*'—Your Royal Highness will forgive me if I thus unceremoniously and frankly repeat the very words which the poor creature uttered——"

"You need make no apology, Mr. Page," exclaimed the Prince, whose thoughts were now divided between compunctious feelings on behalf of Octavia and licentious hopes of possessing Pauline. "Pray continue—and hesitate not to tell me everything just as it occurred."

"The frenzied shriek of wildest anguish which thrilled from the lips of Octavia," resumed Page, "was echoed by one of the tensest alarm on the part of Pauline; and the whole neighbourhood would have been frightened out of its seven senses had not nearly every one gone into town to see the illuminations in honour of your Royal Highness's marriage. But my wife was at home—and I was in the arbour, as I have already explained: and while Mrs. Page was rushing down the steps in one direction, I was dashing through the evergreens in another. Over the iron railings once more—into our neighbours' garden we sped—and this time Miss Pauline was right glad of our presence: for poor Octavia had gone raving, raging, furiously mad—and it was as much as all three of us could do to hold her down. At one instant she threatened to lay violent hands upon herself—at another she —— But this may amount to treason——"

"Speak out, man—and fear nothing!" exclaimed the Prince. "I suppose she menaced my life as well as her own!"

"Just so, may it please your Royal Highness," responded Page.

"It does not please me at all," observed the Prince, for a moment suffering his features to relax into a smile at the oddness of that conjuncture of phrases. "But what was the result of this lamentable relapse on Miss Clarendon's part?"

"Me and my wife remained along with Miss Pauline until two o'clock this morning," replied Page; "and never shall I forget the awful paroxysms of anguish and outbursts of feeling which we were compelled to witness! And poor Miss Pauline herself——Ah! that young lady possesses an excellent heart——"

"And when you left Octavia at two this morning?" demanded the Prince abruptly.

"She had sunk into a profound sleep, through sheer exhaustion," was the answer: "but her last words were fraught with terrible menace towards your Royal Highness. And now, perhaps, the object of my intrusion upon the time and notice of your Royal Highness may be sufficiently understood, if not adequately explained——"

"You think that I entertain any fears of a poor maniac girl?" said the Prince, vainly endeavouring to conceal his uneasiness.

"I do not suppose that your Royal Highness apprehends actual violence," Page hastened to observe; "because I am well aware that Miss Octavia Clarendon, if she presented herself at Carlton House, would not be allowed to push her way further than the hall. But she might nevertheless create such a disturbance—proclaim so many disagreeable things——"

"Yes—*that* is indeed to be feared," exclaimed the Prince. "Of course her sister will not encourage her in this wild scheme of demanding an interview with me——"

"On the contrary. I have already assured your Royal Highness that Miss Pauline did everything she could to reason her sister out of the notion," said Mr. Page. "But what is she to do with a mad girl?"

"What would you do with her?" demanded the Prince, perceiving some sinister meaning in the look which the ex-bagman fixed upon him.

"I would have her locked up in a lunatic-asylum," was the prompt answer: and he looked harder and more significantly still at the heir-apparent.

"But do you really fancy that she is so very dangerous?" he inquired, with evident irresolution how to act.

"I am certain, great Prince," responded Page, "that the very first opportunity she has, Octavia will break away from her sister's care; and, under the inspiration of her frenzied ideas, she will not only seek Carlton House, but her history will be proclaimed to all who may be near enough to listen!"

"This must not take place, Mr. Page," said the Prince: then, after walking once or twice up and down the room, he suddenly stopped short within a yard of the ex-bagman, on whom he cast a look as if he meant to read him through and through.

"I am staunch—discreet—faithful," observed Page, perceiving and understanding that glance so penetrating and so searching.

"But will you take this business in hand?—will you guarantee to remove Octavia Clarendon to some place of security?" demanded the Prince.

"I will, your Royal Highness," was the answer.

"And your wife—is she as trustworthy as yourself?"

"There's not a pin's point between us in that respect."

"Then let her so insinuate herself into the confidence of Pauline—of Pauline, mind," observed the Prince, in a low deep tone,—"that the young maiden will learn to look upon her as a sincere friend in whom the most implicit trust is to be placed. Pauline must not know, therefore, that *you* have anything to do with the removal of Octavia——"

"Leave it all to me, illustrious Prince," ejaculated Page: "*both* affairs shall be managed to your satisfaction. I understand what your Royal Highness means with regard to Pauline. Well—it shows the exquisite taste of your Royal Highness——In short, Pauline shall be yours," he added, with a resolute emphasis and a significant look.

"Good!—we understand each other," said the Prince. "And now let me hear your views relative to reward—for I scarcely think that a man in an easy position of life as you are, will be satisfied with mere lucre."

"Your Royal Highness has judged me accurately," exclaimed Mr. Page: then, after a little hesitation, he observed, "I presume that a few honours and titles—even so low as that of *Knight*—will be conferred shortly in commemoration of your Royal Highness's nuptials."

"Precisely so," returned the Prince, with difficulty subduing a violent inclination to burst out laughing in the ex-bagman's face. "Should you like to be a Knight, Mr. Page?"

"The distinction would just suit me to a nicety," was the complaisant response: "and I flatter myself that Mrs. P. would not disgrace it."

"Then let this understanding be established between us," exclaimed the Prince: "that when Octavia Clarendon shall have been placed in restraint and Pauline Clarendon delivered over to my arms, your shoulder is to receive the accolade of Knighthood."

"I shall soon win the honour thus graciously guaranteed by your Royal Highness," said Mr. Page.

He then made a low bow and took his departure, well pleased with the promise which had resulted from his visit to Carlton House.

CHAPTER CLXXXIII.

THE INVALID NOBLEMAN AND HIS UNKNOWN NURSE.

THE clock,—that clock with its chimes which had led Florimel to discover where he was,—had just begun to strike as the young nobleman awoke. He lay still to count the strokes of the harmonious bell;—and he reckoned twelve.

"Twelve!" he repeated in an under-tone. "But is it twelve at noon or twelve at night?" he asked, speaking to himself under the momentary impression that he was alone.

"Noon, my dearest Gabriel—high noon by the sun," was the immediate response murmuringly given in that well-known dulcet sound that proved so welcome to his ear: and at the same moment he felt her form leaning across his chest—her glowing cheek met his—and her mouth, rich in its moist lubricity, was pressed to his own lips.

"Noon, dearest—noon?" he repeated, so soon as he recovered the breath which that long luxurious kiss took away for upwards of a minute: "and have I slept, then, uninterruptedly since seven o'clock last evening?—and *that* too, after having lain ill for three days?"

"It is precisely because you were so very, very ill for those three days that a good long interval of slumber was necessary to restore your exhausted strength," answered the Unknown. "During that interval of three days you were sometimes raving in delirium—sometimes plunged into a trance whence I despaired of ever awaking you. You had received a violent blow, which produced concussion of the brain—but I will at once relieve you from any apprehension relative to the beauty of your countenance, my Gabriel, by assuring you that the wound on your forehead is comparatively slight and will leave no scar."

Thus speaking, in a voice full of concentrated tenderness, the Unknown again bent over the invalid and lavished upon him the softest, sweetest, and most delicious caresses,—but rather as a proof of love than to excite his passions at that moment.

"Thanks—a thousand thanks, for the tender interest you exhibit in my behalf," murmured Florimel. "And during those three days you have been my nurse?" he inquired, in a tone of deep feeling.

"I have scarcely ever left you for a single moment, Gabriel," was the soft and tremulous reply; "and had it not been for me, you would have slept with Death! Ah! it was cruel, cruel in the extreme on the part of Lady Bellenden to send you away from her house in a state of insensibility and without even summoning a surgeon to examine your ailment. But she is a prude—a veritable prude—one of your unfeeling sanctimonious ones, who would sooner be thought heartless altogether than too easy in making allowances for the follies, errors, and weaknesses of their fellow-creatures."

"Then the Marchioness thrust me ignominiously forth from her dwelling?" said Lord Florimel. "Well—I am free to confess that I deserved such treatment on her part: for it was assuredly a sovereign insult for me to enter her presence in female disguise——But perhaps you know nothing of the circumstances, my charmer?" exclaimed the young nobleman, suddenly recollecting himself.

"What I did not glean from Lady Bellenden's servants, I could pretty well conjecture from beholding you in the disguise of a female," said the Unknown. "Thus it happened:—I was passing by Bellenden Priory in my barouche, when I saw at the gate a carriage which although a plain one, I instantaneously recognised as belonging to my friends the Desboroughs. Wishing to see the Countess of Desborough, I ordered my carriage to stop while I made inquiries whether it was her ladyship who was then paying a visit to the Priory. The domestics replied in the affirmative; and I was just alighting from my own carriage, when several

servants came forth from the gate, bearing amongst them what appeared to be the inanimate form of a female. The foremost domestic instantaneously cried out to the footman in attendance upon Lady Desborough's carriage, '*Here! you are to drive quick to Lord Florimel's, Piccadilly, and then return to fetch the Countess.*' — While thus speaking, the domestic opened the carriage door and was about to have you thrust ruthlessly in, all insensible as you were, when I sprang forward at the mention of your name. Yes—it was indeed you—*you*, my own handsome, well-beloved Gabriel! Reckless of what the servants might think, and not even pausing to reflect or ascertain whether they knew who you were or fancied you were really a lady, I claimed you as a cousin. *Cousin*, you know, applies to either sex; and so I could not be wrong. You were forthwith thrust into my carriage instead of Lady Desborough's—'twas all the work of an instant—and, with your dear head pillowed on my bosom, you were whirled hither in a state of continued unconsciousness. Now you know all, Gabriel—except that I have been very unhappy on your account," added the invisible but not impalpable syren, her voice sinking into accents of the tenderest pathos. "But, thank heaven! you are beyond all danger now—indeed you are convalescent—and I am truly happy once more!"

"Ah! my dearest friend—my kind-hearted, excellent, adorable nurse," exclaimed Florimel, as he drew the lady towards him, —"how deep is the debt of gratitude which I owe you! The proofs of sincere and disinterested affection which you have given me in this instance, have touched me profoundly — Oh! profoundly, profoundly," he added, with a deliberate emphasis, as he strained to his breast that glowing form which he had caught in his arms.

We need hardly repeat that the chamber was as dark as if there were no windows at all. The lady was standing by the bed-side: she was clad in a loose vesture—a mere morning wrapper negligently fastened at the waist with a band. Her feet were thrust into slippers: her hair was flowing dishevelled over her shoulders. Even in the midst of that utter darkness did a species of knowledge of her superb charms glimmer up intuitively, and expand into a thrilling conviction, in the soul of Lord Florimel, as he threw his arms around her neck and held her in a bending posture over him, with her bosom heaving against his chest, her cheek pillowed upon his own, and their lips meeting in frequent kisses.

Not that he could form any positive idea of the actual appearance of his unknown charmer—much less be enabled to recognise her should they meet hereafter in the public street: he knew not, for instance, the colour of her hair, the hue of her eyes, or the expression of her countenance;—and thus the principal indications, indeed the main guides, to the recognition of an individual were entirely wanting. But that she *was* handsome, he had no doubt: his hand had already, during their different interviews, passed a dozen times over her features and acquired the certainty that such was the fact. That she was splendidly formed, was even still more satisfactorily ascertained, — the sculptural richness, the fine contours, and the gentle inflections of the figure, being more easily traced by the sense of touch only, than the configuration of the countenance. Yes—assuredly she was handsome—gloriously handsome—and grandly formed, with Diana-like proportions!—and moreover, there emanated from her whole person, as it were, a perfume of love and an effluence of soft voluptuousness which intoxicated the sense, while the suavity of her manner and the tender music of her voice stole with the engrossing power of an æsthetic rapture upon the spirit.

Ah! dangerous, dangerous woman: even in the cimmerian darkness wherewith she enveloped herself, but in the midst of which the imagination still depicted her glowing with light and brilliant as a goddess, did she exercise a power too well calculated to enslave the heart around which she cast her spells!

And as she lay thus half-reclining upon the breast of her noble young paramour, the thought gradually began to take birth and expand in his imagination, to the effect that such as this splendid Unknown seemed to be, the Marchioness of Bellenden doubtless must be. In a word, Florimel began to compare the charms which were now in such close and exciting contact relative to himself, with those which his fancy conjectured might be concealed beneath the widow's-weeds worn by the Marchioness. The Unknown was tall and slightly inclined to *embonpoint*, with a bust of the most voluptuous proportions: so was the Marchioness. The Unknown was assuredly possessed of splendid teeth: so was the Marchioness. Ah! but why does Florimel pause here?—why does the comparison, or rather the attempt at identification, abruptly stop? Because he is suddenly struck by the folly of attempting to push the task any farther, — inasmuch as although he knows the colour of Lady Bellenden's hair and eyes, the precise hue of her lips, the tint of her complexion, and the expression of her countenance,—yet he is utterly ignorant on all those points in respect to the Unknown!

And there were so many women of splendid forms, tall stature, and luxuriant charms, in the circle of his acquaintance, that because the Unknown was of that description of beauty, he might just as well identify her with the Duchess of Devonshire, or Mrs. Harvey Aston, or the Countess of Jersey, or even the Princess Sophia, or the Princess Amelia, or Lady Letitia Lade,—he might as well identify his Unknown with any one of these, we say, as with the Marchioness of Bellenden.

Besides, the hypothesis was contradicted by fifty other circumstances. Was it probable that a woman of the strictest seclusion and of eternal widowhood, was the visitress at masquerades?—was it possible that the serene, tranquil, and benevolent recluse was the lascivious divinity of that voluptuous boudoir?—could Lady Belleden entertain any serious notion of marrying him, if he were so inclined? — and how could she possibly exercise the slightest influence over that law-suit which threatened him with ruin? No—no: it was preposterous;—the attempt to identify the pure-minded, solitude-loving, even prudish Marchioness with the Unknown whose passions were so frenetic and whose conduct was so incomprehensible—such an attempt, we say, Lord Florimel suddenly abandoned as being ridiculous to a degree!

"I can guess what is passing in your mind, you silly fellow," whispered the Unknown, after a pause

of a few minutes; and her voice, soft and musical, was playfully bantering and full of good-humoured archness.

"Of what was I thinking, dearest?" inquired Florimel, now struck by the additional fact that the voice of his charmer was far more dulcet, more tender, and more harmonious than that of the Marchioness of Bellenden.

"You are seeking to establish my identity with some one of your female acquaintances," responded the Unknown: "you are racking your brain to discover whose personal appearance and attributes, *so far as you know them*, would exactly correspond with mine, *so far as you can form an idea of them*. Now am I not right, Gabriel?—and if right, is not this a little piece of treachery on your part—rendered less justifiable, too, by the devotedness with which I have tended you during your really dangerous illness?"

"Oh! pardon—pardon me, my invaluable friend!" exclaimed the young nobleman, touched to his very heart's core by the plaintive accents which her voice assumed as she gave utterance to those interrogative remonstrances. "I am unworthy of all the tenderness you have lavished upon me—all the love which you have shown so many times towards me! Yes—I confess that I was allowing my imagination to run riot into the realms of conjecture and seek to discover the mystery of your identification. It was indeed wrong—unworthy of myself—unjust, ungenerous, ungrateful towards you! But, Oh! can you be surprised—even though you may feel hurt and angry——"

"I am no longer hurt—and not for a moment was I angry, Gabriel," interrupted the lady, in her softest tones: and she silenced with the fondest kisses the reply he was about to make. "There—let us say no more upon the subject—unless it be that you will permit me to assure you how impossible it is for you to discover my secret until the

day and the hour shall come when I may choose to reveal it. It is a mystery which defies all your power of penetration, and which remains proof against all possible conjecture. *When* you are to see the veil torn aside—and *whether* you ever shall—depend entirely upon yourself. As my husband alone can you obtain the gratification of your curiosity in that respect: otherwise, the secret goes with me to the tomb! That I am worthy of becoming your wife, so far as beauty, accomplishments, social position, and fortune are concerned, I may assert without vanity: but whether—Oh! whether you entertain such misgivings relative to my moral character——"

And she lowered her voice until it was lost in the billing murmurs of the kisses which she lavished upon him and in which she thus purposely drowned it.

"My adored friend—my beauteous Unknown—my kind, generous, and affectionate nurse," exclaimed Florimel, wrapt in a perfect enthusiasm of devotedness and gratitude towards the woman who appeared to make him the idol of her own illimitable fondness,—"I once more demand your pardon for having, though merely in imagination, endeavoured to penetrate your secret. I love you—Oh! be assured that I love you; and I would sooner kill myself than cause you a moment's pain. Dear friend! how affectionate are your caresses—how tender your words towards me! How can I express my gratitude for so much love on your part? Ah!! I feel that sooner than seek to penetrate this mystery wherewith it suits thee to surround thyself, it would be worthier far were I to assist thee to the utmost of my power to maintain thy secret until the time shall come when thou may'st reveal it. Tell me, then, my charmer—tell me, my goddess of love in human shape—what can I do to satisfy thee of my gratitude?—what course can I adopt to deserve thy good opinion and merit thine unalterable friendship?"

"I will tell you, my Gabriel, what you must do to convince me of the sincerity of all that you have been telling me," said the syren-stranger, pressing still more closely to his bosom and his cheek as she thus bent over him; "you must leave London for a few weeks——"

"Leave London!" ejaculated the young nobleman, now vividly reminded of the fact that all his thoughts had recently been fixed on the discovery of Pauline's place of abode, and that the very disguise which had led to his present invalid condition had been assumed in order to assist him in the prosecution of that object.

"There!" ejaculated the Unknown, with an accent of vexation, and partially disengaging herself from his embrace: "I feared—I dreaded lest I should be asking too much! Oh! you have ties binding you to London—ties which are insuperable——"

"Be not offended with me, dearest!" exclaimed Florimel, folding her once more in his arms with an enthusiastic warmth—for the effluence of her charms and the fascinations of her language and manner stole upon him with a power against which he had neither the moral nor physical courage to offer any resistance.

"Oh! I am not offended with you, Gabriel!" she murmured, in a tone of the deepest pathos: "but I fear—I know—I am confident that you do not love me! You regard me only as an occasional playmate for voluptuous dalliance—the being who from time to time affords you a pleasing variety in your pursuit of amorous enjoyments! But, Oh! it is not thus that I wish to be loved—it is not in this light that I thought you could regard me!"

And Florimel felt his cheek become moist with the tears that fell from the lady's eyes as she still bent over him.

"Ah! wretch that I am thus to torture you!" he cried, no longer master of himself. "After all your goodness towards me, I am a demon of cruelty——"

"No—no: 'tis I who expect and exact too much," murmured the Unknown, in a voice tremulous with emotion. "We will separate, Gabriel—separate, never to meet again——"

"By heavens, this shall not be!" ejaculated the nobleman, whose feelings were worked up to such a pitch that he was prepared to make any sacrifice and consummate any deed of rashness or folly for the sake of the mysterious enchantress who had acquired and established such an immense influence over his soul. "Tell me what you demand of me, dearest one—and I swear to accomplish your wishes!" he cried, in a voice full of delirious fervour and wild enthusiasm.

"Ah! now you are my own dear, dear Gabriel once more," whispered the lady, bestowing upon him the tenderest caresses at the same time;—"and never, never shall you repent the proof of love and affection which you thus give me!"

"Henceforth you shall be all on earth to me, my invisible but cherished angel!" cried the infatuated young man. "Let us think not of the absurd shackles of marriage—but be you my mistress—the joy of my heart—bound to me by the tenderest of ties—as I shall remain bound to you by the same eternal bonds!"

"Oh! now you are dictating terms to me," exclaimed the lady, in a tone of gentle remonstrance, but the accents of which were full of fondness; "whereas 'tis for me to prescribe certain conditions to you—at least if the promises which you ere now made me be sincere——"

"Name your conditions, my well-beloved!" interrupted Florimel, his voice laden with the gush of enthusiastic feelings that poured forth from his soul as he strained the warm, glowing, palpitating form of that splendid creature more closely still to his own breast: "dictate your terms—and I swear by all that is sincerest, and sweetest, and holiest in the experience of love to obey you as if you were my guardian angel—the arbitress of my destinies! Say, then, what do you require of me? That I should leave London for a few weeks——"

"Yes—and that you should repair to some distant town—some pleasant watering-place, for instance—at which you must remain to ponder over all I have ever said to you, either on this occasion of our being together or when we met last——"

"Ah! you spoke to me *then* of many strange things," whispered Florimel.

"And strange things can I perform also, my well-beloved," responded the lady, accompanying the assurance with the tenderest caresses,—"if you will only place implicit confidence in me and act in accordance with my dictates. O Gabriel—dear Gabriel—I can save you—save you, if I choose, from you know not how much adversity!" she exclaimed, in a tone of enthusiasm suddenly gushing

forth with all the accents of a fervid and unmistakable sincerity.

"Command me—order me, as thou wilt, my guardian genius!—for such shall I henceforth consider thee—and such wilt thou become in respect to my destinies!" cried the infatuated young nobleman, growing each instant more and more enslaved to a despotism that was as delicious as it was incomprehensible: then, as if he suddenly felt all the folly of thus yielding himself up to an unknown tyrant, albeit the chains which she cast upon him were of silk and of flowers, he exclaimed, "Oh! whence is derived that power of fascination and of enchantment which thou hast learnt to wield over me with such irresistible success? 'Tis the effluence of a wondrous beauty the glory of which I am as yet only permitted to imagine, but in the voluptuousness of which I have revelled again and again! Oh! tell me then, adored one, what shall thy slave do to testify his devotion?—whither shall he repair?—when shall he take his departure from this great city?—and how long shall he remain away? Give me thy commands upon all these points, my guardian angel—my unknown goddess—my unseen divinity!—and thou shalt be obeyed to the very letter—aye, to the very letter, as I have a soul to be saved!"

"You solemnly—sacredly—inviolably swear to all *this?*" murmured the lady, in a tone of subdued ecstacy and triumph. "Let me feel you place your hand upon your heart and take the most serious of oaths to perform your promise."

"There!—now are you content, my angel?" asked Florimel, when he had done as he was directed.

"Yes—and I love you more—Oh! ten thousand times more than ever!" exclaimed the Unknown, embracing him with rapture. "The conditions I impose upon you, my Gabriel, are these:—that when night comes you suffer yourself to be placed in my carriage, which will take you to Dover, where you will fix your abode for a few weeks. You can thence write to your own mansion in Piccadilly, ordering such servants as you may choose to select for the purpose to follow you to that sea-port;—and there you will remain for six weeks without returning to the metropolis. Now, do you repent of the promise you have given me and the oath you have taken?"

"No—no—I do not repent!" exclaimed the infatuated young nobleman. "But shall I be compelled to live in solitude at Dover?—shall I not be enabled to press you in my arms during an interval which, without you, will seem long and tedious indeed?"

"Oh leave all that to me, my Gabriel!" returned the impassioned woman, straining him again and again to her heaving, glowing, throbbing bosom, and lavishing upon him those caresses which were so full of rapture, ecstacy, and voluptuousness. "You must ask me no more questions, Gabriel: but perhaps you will be better pleased with all that may take place than you can now possibly anticipate. Is our bargain complete?—is our compact settled?"

"It is—it is, my angel!" cried the young nobleman: "and thus—and thus—and thus do I ratify it," he added, accompanying each fervid ejaculation with as warm a kiss impressed upon the moist lips that sought his own.

We need not dwell longer upon this scene. Suffice it to say that the Unknown Lady remained with her infatuated paramour for another hour, until he sank off into a delicious slumber. She then rose from the arm-chair in which she had seated herself while he was sinking into that refreshing sleep that stole gradually upon him; and on quitting the room she carefully locked the door behind her, taking the key from the lock so that no one could possibly enter the chamber from without.

Then a profound silence reigned in that apartment,—a silence that was broken only by the low and regular respiration of the sleeping nobleman.

But gradually a slight rustling of the drapery hanging around the bed and sweeping the floor, broke gently and almost imperceptibly upon that stillness;—and some one crept with infinite caution from beneath the couch. Then the individual paused—listened—and held his breath, as if it were an inanimate spectre from the grave. The young nobleman continued to sleep on profoundly—uninterruptedly;—and the intruder, satisfied that this was the case, took a pair of scissors from his pocket, and cut off a small piece of the curtains surrounding the bed. He then felt his way in the same cautious, noiseless manner, towards the window; and from the hangings drawn so closely over the shutters, he cut another fragment with his scissors. Again he paused—again he listened—and he acquired the certainty that Lord Florimel was steeped in the Lethean sweets of a profound slumber.

The intruder now took from about his person several skeleton-keys, which he tried one after another in the lock of the door of the chamber. This proceeding he conducted with the same caution which he had hitherto observed—stopping frequently and holding his breath to listen whether the sleeping nobleman had been disturbed. But Florimel's slumber was proof against the low sounds of the keys grating in the lock; and at length the intruder succeeded in opening the door. He peeped forth: the coast was clear—and, carefully fastening the door behind him, he entered the passage, which was now lighted by the sun-beams that flowed through a window over the staircase. Descending that staircase, the intruder opened the door at the foot and entered the garden. Plunging into an avenue of evergreens, he passed rapidly and unobserved along the shaded walk towards the gate, whence he issued without encountering a soul to notice or question him.

When night came, Lord Florimel awoke to find the Unknown Lady seated in the arm-chair by his side; and, in the profound darkness of that chamber, but assisted by the hands of the syren, he put on the male apparel which her thoughtful care provided for him. This toilette was interrupted by many ardent caresses: but at length it was completed;—and, a bandage having been placed over Lord Florimel's eyes, he was led forth by his companion from the boudoir of love, and mystery, and darkness.

The stairs were descended—the garden was traversed—the gate was passed—and into the carriage which was waiting did Lord Florimel mount, still guided by the Unknown. Hasty farewells were whispered between them: the door was closed—and the vehicle rolled rapidly away.

For some minutes did the young nobleman remain plunged in the reflections which this new phase in his life was so well calculated to excite: then, taking off the bandage, he found, as he had

expected, that the blinds of the carriage were drawn up and immoveable. In another quarter of an hour the vehicle stopped; and the tall footman, opening the door, unfastened the blinds and lowered them. Florimel looked forth; and he at once recognised the neighbourhood where this halt took place—for the towers of Westminster Abbey were rearing their grey summits close by, in the pure moonbeams; and the arching rows of lamps marked with their tracery of glimmering light the curved viaduct of Westminster Bridge.

The operation of unfastening and lowering the blinds only occupied a couple of minutes; and as the bell of the Abbey proclaimed the hour of eleven, the carriage rolled rapidly along over the bridge.

"My God! what have I done?" murmured Florimel to himself, a sudden pang of remorse now inflicting upon his heart a torture like the stab of a poniard. "I have abandoned my Pauline—I have renounced that angel for a being whom I do not know! Alas! alas! I have been guilty of the most tremendous imprudence,—aye—and of the blackest perfidy towards Pauline!"

Then, covering his face with his hands, Lord Florimel remained for upwards of five minutes in the deepest reverie,—a reverie in which, though his body was as motionless as a statue, his mind was travelling along the beaten road of the past with the speed of a race-horse. All the enormous folly of which he had been guilty in surrendering himself up to the influence of the unknown syren, now developed itself with an effect too sombre to be positively startling—too darkly gloomy to be actually intense or thrilling: but a sorrow, profound as a consternation and black as despair, stole upon him—and he felt like a man who by one single false step has ruined a brilliant position or undermined a colossal fortune.

Vainly did he endeavour to console himself—or rather to justify his own treachery towards Pauline—by the reflection that she had of her own accord put an end to everything between them: again and again would recur the crushing and overwhelming conviction that, if he really loved her, it was his duty to persevere in finding her out and demanding an explanation of the past. Again and again, too, was the fact forced upon his contemplation that *she* loved him, and that her cruelty would not endure for ever. But now he had resigned her—resigned that being so beautiful and so charming: he had renounced her—and for the sake of a stranger!

These were the thoughts which now overhung his mind in the shape of the darkest, gloomiest, most sombre shadows;—and he longed to order the carriage to stop—that he might leap forth and retrace his way homeward as rapidly as he could. But why did he not do so?—why did he remain voiceless and motionless upon the downy cushion of that carriage? Because, as the reader has already seen on more occasions than one, he lacked that moral courage which could alone arouse him to the point of energy adequate to sustain an effectual struggle against the influences which were urging him on in his career of folly: and moreover the spell of the syren's fascinations was still upon him! All the mystery by which she was surrounded—the power which she asserted over his own fortunes, either to save them from destruction or precipitate their ruin—and then, the impression which her wanton disposition had produced upon his own ardent temperament,—together with the solemn promise which he had given to pay implicit obedience to her commands and obey her injunctions,—all these circumstances, combined with a burning curiosity to solve the enigma of which she was the charming but dangerous object, exercised upon the mind of the young nobleman an influence which clung to him like the poisoned garment of Dejanira every time he endeavoured to throw it off.

"No! I must accomplish my destiny—I must not essay any longer to battle against it!" he suddenly exclaimed aloud, as he withdrew his hands from his face and woke up from his painful reverie. "Whatever be the results, I must pursue this adventure to the end! The Unknown offers to save me from ruin if I will marry her. '*Make me your wife*,' she said, '*and I will stifle the law-suit which otherwise must inevitably destroy you in respect to fortune and despoil you of rank.*'—Well, she loves me: and perhaps I may yet induce her to save me, even without becoming her husband. Then, Pauline—my own sweet Pauline—I may find thee out, throw myself at thy feet, and make my peace with thee, my angel and my beauty!"

Thus mused Lord Forimel *now:* and therefore the carriage continued to be whirled along the Kentish Road without a word of counter-order from his lips!

CHAPTER CLXXXIV.

THE MANIACS.

A WEEK had elapsed since James Melmoth awoke to the consciousness that he was undergoing the treatment of a lunatic.

He was in a stone dungeon, with a massive arched roof, and so far open in front that instead of having any masonry on that side, it was separated by a stout iron grating from a long narrow passage. It therefore resembled the den of a wild beast. There were six of these places all in a row; and they were denominated the Mad-Cells.

In the middle of the iron gate set in the grating, was a small wicket about a foot square, and which was used for introducing the food of those prisoners who were too violent and dangerous for the keeper to enter their dens. Each cell contained an iron bedstead screwed down to the stone pavement; and the bedding was of the strongest and coarsest material. No table—no chair—no article of furniture, in fine, save the iron bed, appeared in either of those cells. The light was admitted from narrow windows in the wall of the passage; and in winter-time the place was warmed by means of a fire at the end of that stone corridor.

Such were the mad-cells of the old workhouse of which we are writing:—and it was in one of those accursed dens that James Melmoth had now been kept a prisoner for seven days.

The reader will remember that the unfortunate man had leapt from his couch in the infirmary to make an attack upon Mr. Thurston, and that he had fallen with a violence which deprived him of his senses. His restoration to life was followed by a terrible delirium in which he had given

utterance to the most awful ravings, and had acted in a manner compelling the surgeon to have him put under restraint. He was therefore lodged in one of the mad-cells; and hence it was that when he awoke to consciousness *he found himself held in the bondage of a tight-fitting vesture, the legs of the trousers being fastened to the mattress, and the sleeves of the jacket sewn to the sides of that garment itself.*

After long communing with himself, Melmoth was enabled to look his position clearly in the face. He saw that so long as he was considered to be a madman, there was no danger of his being handed over to the grasp of criminal justice for the violation of the churchyard—a horror from which his mind, in its calm and lucid moments, recoiled with inexpressible loathing. But if, on the other hand, his conduct afforded proof of a recovered sanity, he would assuredly be transferred from the mad-cell of the workhouse to the dungeon of a felon's gaol.

It was therefore necessary that he should at least simulate a mental alienation which had in reality ceased to exist. But then there was the consideration—how was he to get released from the bondage in which his limbs were confined? The task was a difficult one: for in order to accomplish his aims, he must affect just so much madness as would save him from being handed over to the criminal law, and yet he must exhibit a sufficient degree of tractability to induce the surgeon to emancipate him from the strait-jacket.

This was the astute policy upon which James Melmoth resolved;—and it succeeded so far that the medical attendant ordered him to be released from the bondage in which his limbs were confined. But still he remained a captive in that dreadful cell; and it was evident from the questions put to him by the keeper, the master of the workhouse, and the surgeon himself, that they more than half suspected his gloomy manner and eccentric observations to be the assumed semblance of madness. Moreover, Melmoth, who was ever on the alert to catch anything that fell from the lips of those authorities who visited him, overheard certain remarks between the surgeon and the keeper which convinced him that his duplicity was rapidly becoming more and more transparent;—and he shuddered every time a step approached his cell, for fear that the officers of justice were coming to bear him away to prison.

His state of mind was horrible in the extreme. In the neighbouring cells there were real maniacs,—men whose brain adversity had touched in the first instance, and whom the tyranny of the workhouse goaded to insanity altogether. The fiend-like yells—the demoniac cries—the appalling lamentations—the bitter weeping—the piteous moaning—and the frightful language, which exhibited the different phases of mental alienation on the part of those unhappy beings, rendered the day torturing to a degree and the night positively hideous. Melmoth, in fact, felt that if he were to remain long in such a shocking vicinage, he should really end by going mad himself.

And thus a week had passed;—and at the expiration of this time, the miserable man perceived that there were moments when his own brain was reeling—not under the influence of that appalling monomania which had driven him, even against his will, to the desecration of the churchyard,—but with another and different species of mental perturbation. His own wretched thoughts were poignant, and tense, and harrowing enough to drive him crazy: and when to their bitterness and anguish, and despair, were superadded all the horrors of the maniac revels on his right and his left, the wonder was *not* that he should have felt his own brain gradually affected, but that the equilibrium of his reason should have survived even for a single day the awful shock of such tremendous influences!

Nevertheless, as we have stated, a week passed—and during this interval the poor wretch retained his reason so well that he was even enabled and compelled to *affect* madness in order to save himself from a doom more dreaded than his present condition. But he began to feel that this state of things could not possibly last: his assumed insanity was suspected, even while it was verging into the dire reality of the terrible affliction. What could he do?—to remain *there* was to court the condition of the raving lunatics who were writhing, yelling, roaring, weeping, and lamenting in the other cells: and to give up playing the part of an insane person, was to rush headlong into all the infamy and intolerable disgrace attendant upon a trial at the Old Bailey as a desecrator of the resting-places of the dead!

It was in the evening of the seventh day—the sun had set—and, as no lamp burnt in the stone passage, the mad-cells were all as dark as pitch. Melmoth was seated upon his bed, thinking of his dead wife whose corpse he had torn up from the grave—thinking of the care with which he had re-consigned it to the grave,—thinking also of his poor children whom he had last seen in the infirmary, but concerning whom he had not dared ask a single question since he had become an inmate of that barred den,—of all these subjects was he thinking, while the train of his ideas was interwoven with other threads of harrowing reminiscences, and while the yells and cries of the neighbouring maniacs were ringing like a thousand bells through his wildering brain.

Presently a light flashed in at the end of the passage—footsteps advanced—and Melmoth, anxious to escape those searching questions which the authorities of the place were wont to put to him in order to probe the real state of his mind, threw himself softly back upon the bed and pretended to be wrapped in a profound slumber.

"Now, then, hold your cussed tongues, you waggabones!" thundered the voice of the keeper, as he entered the passage, carrying a lantern in his hand.

Some of the maniacs became stupified with consternation all in a moment; and the voices of the rest fell to a lower key—yells and cries sinking into subdued moanings and half-stifled laments.

"This new order of the magistrates that I should visit the lunatics three times a-day, doesn't suit my book at all," growled the master of the workhouse, who, it appeared, was accompanying the keeper, and whose voice Melmoth had no difficulty in recognising. "It seems that there's going to be a regular clear-out of these mad fellows—and that they're all to go to the county asylum in the course of a few days."

"But what's going to be done with this here chap?" inquired the keeper as he and the master stopped at the grating of Melmoth's cell.

"Ah! that rests with the report which I and the surgeon may send in," responded the governor of the workhouse, in a lower tone than at first. "All confirmed cases of madness are to be packed off to the county asylum, thank God: but I don't know whether *this* is a confirmed case or not. What do *you* think?"

"I've already told you my opinion, sir," was the keeper's answer.

"You don't believe the fellow to be mad?" said the master interrogatively, but in a still more subdued voice than before.

"No—I'll be hanged if I do," returned the keeper, not troubling himself to moderate his usual loud and dictatorial manner of speaking.

"Hush!" murmured the master. "The poor devil sleeps——"

"Not he!" ejaculated the keeper, gruffly. "D'ye think, sir, I haven't seen enough of madness, both real and feigned, not to know which is which, arter having filled this situation for seventeen year, come next Janivary? Why, look at the very position of the feller as he lies on his bed there: I'll be damned if it isn't all sham!"

"If I thought so—after all I've heard about him from our surgeon and a certain Mr. Thurston who was here t'other day when he went off into a fit," said the governor, in a half-musing tone, but speaking in a voice that was clearly audible not only to the keeper but likewise to Melmoth himself,—"I say that if I thought he really was playing any of his tricks, I'd devilish soon have him packed off to Newgate, I would—the monster!"

"Well, and you'll have to do it, sir—and to-morrow too," exclaimed the keeper, brutally: "for I'll take my davy the fellow is no more mad than I am."

"We will see about it," rejoined the master: then after a few moment's pause, he added, "All things considered, I shall take your advice and send in a report, to-morrow, to the effect that you recommend."

The governor and the keeper then withdrew, closing the door of the passage behind them;—and total darkness once more reigned in the place occupied by the mad-cells.

Yes—darkness, but not silence: for scarcely had the two officials retired, when the yells, screams, and other uncouth noises which were wont to make the night terrible there, burst forth again, and with redoubled horror. Starting from his bed—springing from it, as if he were a maddened lion—Melmoth dashed himself in desperation against the strong bars, which vibrated to the fury of the shock. He felt that he was going crazy: he was already crazed for the time being! Goaded to the wildest recklessness by his own dreadful thoughts—by the infernal din which raged like the revelry of hell around him—and by the terrible prospects opened up to his contemplation by the discourse which he had just overheard between the governor and the keeper,—Melmoth had lost all control over his actions.

Although his lips gave not utterance to a word, yet it seemed to him as if some inward voice were roaring out, "I am mad! I am mad!"—and, under the terrible influence of the demoniac spell which was upon him, he dashed himself upon the stone pavement—then against the bars—and then upon the bed, all the iron-work of which clanked as if chains were suddenly thrown down upon the floor. He was infuriate: his eyes gleamed in their bloodshot rage like those of a hyena;—and the foam oozed from his mouth.

Tremendous was the influence which this appalling wrath exercised all in a moment upon the maniac neighbours of the monster-man. The infection of his fury was caught by those kindred spirits already goaded to such a rabid extreme: two or three, whose limbs had been hitherto held powerless and motionless by the strait-jacket and the trowsers fastened to the mattress, burst from their bonds as giants would cast off the trammels of straws:—and the whole lunatic company began dashing themselves, each against the bars of his own cell—while the most appalling cries and yells thrilled through the very walls of massive stone.

In a few minutes the keeper burst into the passage to ascertain the cause of a disturbance more terrible than even it usually was, and which had reached his ears as he was traversing the yard that lay between the tenement containing the mad-cells and the main building. Seizing an enormous whip, he set his lantern upon a window-ledge—pushed the door close in order to prevent as much as possible of the infernal din from being heard outside—and then began to flagellate the maniacs one after another with the most merciless severity. Through the bars swept the long knotted lash of the miscreant's knout—a knout of which the present Emperor of Russia (once Queen Victoria's welcomed guest) would have envied him the possession. Vainly did the yelling maniacs endeavour to elude the terrible thong: vainly also did they attempt to seize it and snatch the accursed instrument from his grasp. Practice had made him perfect in its use: frequent trials of its appalling powers had given him a marvellous experience in its efficient wielding. It literally rent the clothes from the backs of the sufferers; and in great livid wales or bloody streaks did the flesh rise up wherever the lash fell. The punishment was diabolical—the accompanying yells and cries were appalling in the extreme!

But, Ah!—all on a sudden a new and fearful interest is given to the scene. For one of those maniacs who had a few minutes before burst from their coercive garments as if it were a mere vesture of tinder that they were casting off,—one of those infuriate lunatics who seemed suddenly to have been inspired with the strength of Sampson, now all in a moment dashed open the iron gate of his cell. It was the lock which gave way:—the bolt bent and yielded as if it were of lead—and the grated door screamed upon its hinges as it flew open!

An ejaculation of anguished terror burst from the lips of the keeper, as a sense of his mortal danger flashed like lightning to his mind. 'Twas the same as if a goaded tiger had suddenly broken loose. Not an instant was there for flight: the door is burst open—and, quick as the eye can wink, the liberated maniac, bounding forth, springs upon his enemy!

Down upon the pavement they roll together

another yell of agony thrills from the lips of the keeper—and at the next moment his voice is stifled—for the maniac's fingers fasten like an iron vice upon his throat. The suffocating wretch writhes awfully beneath the infuriate lunatic who lies above his convulsing form, with eyes gleaming down in hyena-like rage upon his distorted countenance. Inside the cells every one has become suddenly silent and motionless, as if a consternation had struck upon them all with the influence of a spell; and their countenances, on which the hideous workings seemed to have congealed all in a moment, leaving them horrible and ghastly to contemplate, were fastened as it were against the bars through which their eyes glared like living cinders.

But on the pavement, the work which they are beholding, and the view of which has thus paralysed them all for a few instants,—that dreadful work is now done! Livid with strangulation, and his form still retaining the ominous posture in which it had crisped up as it were in its last convulsions, lay the keeper—an inanimate corpse! His right hand still grasped the merciless weapon the use of which had led to the awful catastrophe that sealed his own fate: his eyes, wide open, appeared ready to start from his head;—and his tongue, black and swollen, lolled out between his foamy lips. All this hideous change had been wrought in a strong, hale, good-looking man in the course of a few short seconds: 'twas the just retribution which accursed tyranny should invariably receive!

The deed, then, was accomplished—and for nearly half a minute did the maniac murderer stand gazing down upon his victim, with mingled compassion and incredulity expressed in every lineament of his haggard countenance. He seemed to be pitying the wretch of whose death he could scarcely believe himself to be the cause. And during that brief interval of half a minute, a profound silence reigned in the mad-cells.

But suddenly the maniac murderer yielded to the impulse of a new instinct. Starting from his motionless attitude of contemplation, he gave utterance to a wild cry of triumph; and, stooping down, he felt in the pockets of his victim for something which he fancied to be there. Then as he drew forth a bunch of keys which he jingled first as he swept them joyously over his head, and then clanged as he dashed them with a madder triumph against the bars, the prisoners inside the cells took up the cry which had burst from his lips; and the place was once more horribly alive with the din of maniac voices.

To open the gates of the several cells was now the work of a few moments;—and, behold! Melmoth was free—in company with half-a-dozen raging, frenetic, infuriate lunatics! And had they not believed him to be *one of themselves*, they would doubtless have torn him to pieces: but he had been a prisoner with the rest—he was just released with the rest also—and, whatever notion the madmen might have entertained of their own condition and state of mind, they naturally enough regarded Melmoth as a brother-victim to some cruel persecution whence they had now achieved their emancipation.

Seizing the lantern, the maniac who had killed the keeper, rushed forth from the building, followed by all the others, Melmoth still keeping among them. For now that murder had been committed, he more than ever saw the necessity of playing the part of a madman, in case he should be caught and thrust back into his dungeon: and his only chance of escape from the precincts of the workhouse was centred in his adhesion to the little band of lunatics who, he had no doubt, would clear themselves a passage despite of all opposition.

The moment that the madmen burst into the yard, their leader carrying the lantern in his hand, an alarm was raised by some paupers who belonged to the kitchen-department; and the door leading into the main building was instantaneously closed and barricaded by the frightened inmates. The walls round the yard were high: and the only avenue of escape was by means of the door just fastened in the face of the band. This fact Melmoth's eagle eye perceived at a glance; and, urging his rabid companions on, he set them the example of making a desperate onslaught upon that door. With cries of rage and fury the maniacs precipitated themselves against it: it shook—it quivered—the strong planks yielded and cracked in their frame-work;—the assault was renewed—again and again did the desperate men dash headlong as it were, like living waves, against the barrier that opposed their path. Some of the brickwork over the door gave way first, and fell in heavy masses upon the besiegers—maiming, wounding, and injuring them seriously: but, goaded all the more terribly to the execution of their purpose, and lashed up to a degree of ferocious frenzy, the maniacs, bleeding all over, and half blinded with the dust of the dislodged masonry, threw themselves in one dense and compact body against the door. It burst open—or rather, it was dashed completely out of its setting—driven in bodily, as if with the concussion of gunpowder or an explosion of foul air.

Then the maniacs rushed into the kitchen, with which the door communicated; and in a moment every cupboard was torn open—every shelf examined—every nook and corner ransacked. The remains of cold meat were seized upon and devoured with even a cannibal voracity: the bread-store adjoining was pillaged of its contents—a barrel of small beer had its top knocked off and a considerable portion of the liquor disposed of in a few moments—and the buttery was invaded in an equally unsparing manner. The maniacs ate and drank like famished wolves—their bloodshot eyes glaring with a sort of ferocious joy and savage triumph at the whole proceeding. Gladly would Melmoth have urged them to press on at once further into the interior of the building: but he dared not interfere with their revel amongst the provisions until they had gorged themselves to repletion. And to this point did they arrive in an incredibly short space of time: for in about ten minutes their appetites were thoroughly satisfied—and the provender which they could not consume, was scattered and trampled in all directions.

Meanwhile the master of the workhouse had mustered the most active and resolute of the able-bodied paupers; and arming them with pokers, shovels, tongs, broom-sticks, and all such weapons as came ready to hand at the moment, he stationed his force in the hall to resist any farther invasion of the building,—while messengers had been sent off to the Tower to demand the assist-

ance of a few soldiers. The New Police were not in existence in those days; and little or no aid was to be expected from the parish constables or night-watchmen: the master was therefore compelled to rely upon such resources and means of defence as he had at his command upon the spot, until the soldiery should arrive.

But no sooner had the maniacs done their work in the kitchen, the bread-store, and the buttery, than Melmoth bade them seize upon the implements which those offices contained, and which constituted weapons of a more formidable character than the fire-irons and broom-handles of the enemy. Thus, when the liberated lunatics sprang up the staircase brandishing roasting-spits, choppers, mallets, and carving-knives, the paupers with the master at their head all took to flight in a moment;—and, giving vent to cries of triumph and yells of frenetic joy, the madmen impulsively followed Melmoth who had now become their leader.

The hall was in their possession: the front door led into the street—and the path to liberty thus lay open and undisputed before them. But Melmoth was anxious to take his children with him: for, even in the wild whirl of his present thoughts and the terrible excitement under which he was labouring, he had leisure and the clearness of intellect sufficient to comprehend that from this time forth he must expect to be hunted by the blood-hounds of justice, and he might never find another opportunity of holding communication with those who were nearest and dearest to him. For an instant he hesitated what course to adopt: the next moment his resolve was taken;—and rushing up the staircase leading from the hall towards the infirmary, he bade the maniacs follow him. Those instincts and impulses which the voice of an angel could not have appeased nor tranquillised, were still easy to direct into any particular channel,—as the torrent, which no mortal arm can stay, will nevertheless pour into the canals that are dug to receive its foaming volume and drain the land which it would otherwise inundate. Thus, as man's ingenuity may turn the course of a flood which he is utterly powerless to stop, so did the influence of Melmoth guide the movements of the maniacs whose progress and whose fury he could not possibly have checked even had he been so disposed.

Up the stairs they rushed—uttering frightful yells and giving vent to diabolical menaces,—brandishing their terrible weapons with ferocious gestures—their eyes glaring wildly—their lips covered with blood-speckled foam. Doors were banged and barricaded all along the passages; and from the interior of the rooms the shrieks of frightened women burst forth. But the lunatic party, headed by its frenzied leader, paused not to attack those chambers: up the flights of stairs they all sped—and into the infirmary they burst as if it were a roaring, raging torrent, dashing open the door with an irresistible power.

The invalids gave vent to cries of terror—the drunken nurse fell down in a fit—and Melmoth's children were startled from the sleep in which they had been plunged. Instantaneously recognising their father, their first impulse was to spring forth and fly into his arms: but when they saw that he held an enormous steel chopper in his hand and that he was backed by half-a-dozen ferocious-looking men all armed in a formidable style, they huddled together with mingled cries, and lamentations, and prayers. There was not a moment to lose;—for Melmoth knew full well that some kind of succour must presently arrive to aid the governor of the workhouse in restoring order. He therefore commanded his children to rise—put on their clothing—and follow him. Yielding to the voice of paternal authority, they hastened to obey, but with cruel fear and visible trembling: and despite of the reassuring words which he now breathed rapidly in their ears, as he assisted them in resuming their apparel, they contemplated him with a terror and a grief that lacerated his very heart.

Two or three minutes were thus expended;—and during that brief interval the maniacs ransacked a cupboard in which a few pots of jam and some bottles, each containing a small allowance of Port wine, were kept for the use of the invalids. These things were disposed of in a trice;—and then the lunatics, inflamed by the wine, began to dance and caper about the room in a style that would have been grotesque enough, were not the presence of these unfortunate wretches so eminently alarming. They however attempted no injury towards the occupants of the infirmary;—and when Melmoth's children were ready to take their departure, they obeyed in a moment the signal which their leader gave them to withdraw.

Down the stairs did the party rush once more,—Melmoth holding his little girl by the hand, and his two sons following close behind him. No molestation was experienced—no opposition presented itself. Indeed, the path was as clear for the formidable band as if they were the only inmates of the workhouse: for the master and his able-bodied paupers did not dare show themselves again—and the soldiery had not as yet had time to arrive from the Tower. The hall was gained—the front door thrown open—and then, simultaneously flinging away their weapons, as if an instinctive feeling suddenly prompted them to act with caution in order to secure their freedom, the lunatics rushed into the street. Darting away in different directions, they disappeared in a few moments;—and Melmoth, thus rid of their terrible companionship, plunged into the maze of dark and narrow streets in the vicinage of the old workhouse.

Taking up the little girl in his arms, he bade the two boys keep close behind him;—and as they sped along, the kind and consoling words which the unfortunate man addressed to his motherless children, reassured them completely, and made their poor hearts rejoice that they were thus restored to the care of their father.

CHAPTER CLXXXV.

TREACHERY.

It was about nine o'clock on the same evening that witnessed the exciting occurrences at Whitechapel Workhouse; and the scene now shifts to Paradise Villas.

In the front parlour of their residence Octavia and Pauline Clarendon were seated, in company with Mr. and Mrs. Page. The curtains were drawn—the lights were burning upon the table—

and the ex-bagman was enjoying a glass of brandy-and-water, of which his spouse occasionally took a sip. This "worthy couple" had "just dropped in" half-an-hour previously, ostensibly to inquire after Octavia's health and have a little chat with Pauline —but in reality with a treacherous and sinister intention, as will shortly transpire.

Pauline was pale and care-worn; and although she endeavoured to appear as gay as possible in order to rally the spirits of her poor afflicted sister, and likewise for the purpose of treating Mr. and Mrs. Page with the courtesy which she was willing to display in return for many apparent civilities and neighbourly attentions on their part, —there were nevertheless moments when she fell into a profound reverie and the expression of her countenance denoted that the saddest thoughts were dominant in her mind.

Octavia was much altered—Oh! so much, that had the Prince of Wales suddenly entered and gazed upon her *now*, he would scarcely have believed that this was the same blooming, smiling, happy creature who but comparatively a few weeks back had surrendered her virgin charms to his embraces. Three months and a half had only elapsed since the memorable evening when accident first threw the royal voluptuary in the way of the beautiful sisters,—three months and a half since he first saw and desired Octavia Clarendon: and during that interval how much had taken place to change both her mental condition and her personal appearance!

The charming freshness of youth,—with its peach-bloom upon its cheeks, its sunny brightness in the eyes, its willowy elasticity in the figure, and its graceful airiness in the footstep,—Oh! all this was gone;—and Octavia, though still eminently beautiful and perhaps more interesting than ever, was but the shadow of her former self! Her cheeks had lost their plump fulness and their carnation

hues of health: slightly sunken, they were pale and colourless, alike with the canker of care and the blight of sickness. Her eyes,—no longer rolling in a voluptuous languor, nor lighting up with the flame of fervid passion and joyous emotion,—were fixed in look, and full of a deep, deep melancholy, varied at intervals by a certain vacancy which indicated that recently unsettled condition of the mind whence she had not altogether recovered. The rich contours of her form still retained their development, because she was naturally modelled upon a scale of the finest proportions: but they had lost that well rounded plumpness which endowed them with so voluptuous a charm and which elevated the softness of feminine beauty into the splendour of a magnificent womanhood. She had grown thinner, to speak in common terms;—and yet, any admirer of the sex who had never seen her before, would not hesitate even now to pronounce her a most lovely creature, alike in face and form.

We have already observed that she was in the way to become a mother: but her condition in this respect was not as yet apparent. At the same time the truth—*the* truth—was, as a matter of course, known unto herself, and to Pauline,—known also to Mr. and Mrs. Page, who had discovered the secret in the way already explained by the former in his conversation with the Prince of Wales. To his Royal Highness that secret had been communicated by Pauline in a brief but touching letter; for the maiden considered it to be her duty to make that announcement to the father of the babe which Octavia bore in her bosom. That letter was however dated from no particular address,—obvious reasons inducing Pauline to conceal her place of abode from the knowledge of the man who, after seducing her sister, had sought to dishonour herself!

The visits of Mr. and Mrs. Page would have been cheerfully dispensed with by the Honourable Miss Pauline Clarendon: but, as we have ere now stated, they had exhibited so much neighbourly friendship towards the sisters, that it was impossible to receive them otherwise than with due courtesy. Although she had gained so much bitter experience in the reading of the world's lessons, and although the manifold dark phases of the human character had been forced upon her contemplation by such a series of infelicitous circumstances, yet her confidence in her species was not so utterly destroyed as to render her suspicious without a cause. She therefore saw no selfish, sinister, nor interested motive in the kindness which Page and his spouse appeared to demonstrate towards her sister and herself: she looked upon him as a well meaning, bustling man, somewhat eccentric and prying withal—and upon his wife as a good-natured woman, excessively ignorant and supremely vulgar;—but she would have been startled with surprise indeed, had any body whispered in her ears a single word calculated to throw a proper light upon the character and disposition of that mean, unprincipled, intriguing, hypocritical couple.

And thus, upon the occasion specified at the opening of this chapter, we find Mr. and Mrs. Page comfortably ensconced in the handsomely-furnished parlour of the villa occupied by Octavia and Pauline Clarendon.

"Might I inquire, without being deemed impertinent," said Mr. Page, after a brief lapse in the discourse, "whether you have seen your noble father lately, Miss Pauline?"

"No—I have not seen him for some time," answered the young lady: then, in an abstracted mood, she added, "Not since the day of his marriage with Miss Aylmer."

"And does he not know where you are residing?" demanded the ex-bagman. "Does he not also know——"

And he glanced significantly towards Octavia, who at that moment was gazing vacantly upon the carpet.

"No—no," replied Pauline, with something like mingled impatience and bitterness in her tone: then, in a low and hurried whisper, she observed, "Do not, I implore you, speak upon any topic which may touch a painful chord in the heart of my poor sister."

"Not for worlds!" ejaculated Mr. Page, but in a similarly subdued voice. "I should be sorry indeed to disturb a mind which within the last few days has made such marvellous progress towards the recovery of its equilibrium. But is it possible," he asked in a whisper, "that Lord Holderness is unacquainted with his daughter's affliction—and its cause?"

"My father knows that Octavia became the victim of her unfortunate love for the Prince of Wales," responded Pauline, in a tone that was scarcely audible and with a look full of emotion;—"and he knows likewise that her reason was affected. But he is ignorant——My God! that I can even sustain my feelings at the idea!——he is ignorant, I say that my poor sister is in a way calculated to afford living evidence of her dishonour!"

And the tears rolled down Pauline's cheeks as she thus spoke.

"Come, come, my dear young lady, cheer up," said Mrs. Page, now taking upon herself the part of consoler.

"It is not so easy to cheer up, Julia," remarked her husband, "when one has many causes of affliction to contemplate and experience. Is your father happy and comfortable in this alliance which he has formed?" asked the ex-bagman, once more giving free vent to his curiosity.

"I cannot say—I know nothing of the matter, Mr. Page," answered Pauline, speaking in a tone which plainly declared that the subject was disagreeable to her.

"Well, Miss—I will not utter another word upon the topic," said the ex-bagman. "By the bye, I believe that unhappy young gentleman, the Hon. Arthur Eaton, is a relation of yours—is he not?"

Pauline replied in the affirmative.

"But do you believe him guilty of the frightful deed imputed to him?" asked Mr. Page.

"Assuredly not!" exclaimed the generous-hearted maiden, her cheeks flushing with indignation at the bare suspicion which the query implied against a young man whose soul, she felt assured, was full of the loftiest and noblest feelings. "Depend upon it," she continued, with a marked emphasis, "that my cousin Arthur is as innocent of that foul crime as I am myself,—and his guiltlessness will become apparent when the judicial investigation takes place. At least, I should hope that the strange and mysterious circumstances which have combined to make him a victim, will be fully and completely unravelled——"

"I hope so too," exclaimed Mr. Page. "But not knowing anything of the young gentleman, I must confess that I took rather an unfavourable view of the business, after reading the newspaper reports."

"Was not the accusation first made against a young female whose innocence speedily became apparent?" asked Pauline: "and may not my cousin in the same manner have become, as I just now expressed myself, the victim of circumstantial evidence? The same almighty providence which decreed the justification of Miss Rose Foster, will likewise make manifest the innocence of Mr. Arthur Eaton. At least, I sincerely hope so," added Pauline emphatically.

"Let me see," observed Mr. Page;—"he has been in prison now upwards of a month—and all the newspapers declared at the time that he was a monomaniac. I suppose he will be put upon his trial all the same?"

"He will assuredly court the fullest investigation," answered Pauline. "The rapid succession of unfortunate incidents which have occupied the interval since the mysterious event took place, has altogether prevented me from visiting my cousin and affording him my sympathy. In fact, I have scarcely dared to leave my sister for a single moment," continued the young lady, again lowering her voice to such a tone as to be inaudible to Octavia: "otherwise I should have assuredly repaired to the dreadful prison in which Arthur Eaton is confined, and by my presence have assured him that there was at least one person in the world who did not believe him guilty of the crime imputed to him. But, although I was unable to visit him, I did not forget to write," added Pauline; "and I assured him of my sympathy."

"You acted most generously," said Mr. Page. "I suppose his father—Lord Marchmont, I believe—is dreadfully cut up?"

"The unhappy old nobleman has been confined to his bed ever since the fatal occurrence which threw so dark an aspersion upon the fame of his beloved son," replied Pauline: "but as the trial must soon take place, let us hope that the result will restore Mr. Eaton to liberty and honour, and his sire to health and happiness."

The conversation was at this moment interrupted by a knock at the front door;—and Mr. Page interchanged a rapid and somewhat uneasy look with his better half. This furtive glance was however unnoticed by Pauline, whose attention was instantaneously directed towards her sister; inasmuch as any sudden noise, especially a knock or ring at the door, invariably produced a startling effect upon her nerves.

Several heavy footsteps were now heard in the passage; and the maid-servant, opening the parlour-door, said, "Some persons wish to speak to you, Miss, if you please."

But before Pauline had time to utter a syllable in reply, the visitors pushed somewhat rudely past the domestic and entered the parlour. They consisted of three men, not over prepossessing in their appearance, and whose aspect at once produced upon Pauline the effect of an evil presentiment,—while the same frightened feeling was experienced by Octavia, who, starting to her feet, clung to her sister's arm as a daughter might throw herself upon the protection of a fond mother.

As for Mr. and Mrs. Page—*they* once more exchanged rapid glances; and in the look of the former there appeared to be a transitory expression of regret for some treacherous part which he was playing—whereas the woman's features were stamped with a cold and selfish decision.

"What do you require of me?" asked Pauline, now recovering her presence of mind and addressing the three men, who were gazing first at her and then at her sister.

"Which is Miss Octavia Clarendon?" demanded the foremost of the party.

"Oh! what do they mean to do with me?" exclaimed the unhappy young lady whose name had just been mentioned: and she clasped her hands in despair.

"Explain the nature of your visit — and be speedy," said Pauline wrestling painfully against the strong spasm which ran through her entire frame: for once more did the presentiment of evil flame up with an appalling brilliancy in her mind.

"Well, we won't keep you any longer in suspense, Miss," returned the spokesman of the party. "The truth is that Dr. Wigton and Dr. Smanks have consulted together—and they've come to the unanimous conclusion that it would be much more conducive to Miss Octavia's health and peace of mind, if she was taken proper care of for a short time—a few months, or so;—and they've signed a certificate to that effect. This certificate has been placed in the hands of Dr. Burton; and we're the doctor's men. There's a chaise waiting outside——"

"O God! I understand you now too well—too well!" shrieked forth Pauline, all the anguish which had been accumulating while the man was speaking, now finding scope for the development of its pent-up fury: and wildly she flung her arms around her sister's neck, exclaiming, "No—no—they shall not take thee from me, my own beloved Octavia!—they shall not separate us thus!"

"What mean you, dearest?" cried the elder Miss Clarendon, returning the fond—the fervid pressure of her sister's embrace. "Who will take me from you?" she asked, with a terrible calmness which was evidently the sure precursor of a still more frightful storm.

"Oh! Octavia—dearest, dearest Octavia," exclaimed Pauline, in a voice of the most rending, piercing, desolating agony,—"they wish to take you from me——My God! they mean to separate us! Oh! we are motherless—we are all the same as if we were fatherless likewise —— we are two orphan sisters——yes, two orphan sisters——alone and friendless in the world! And they will not allow us to remain together——they would tear us asunder—separate us——"

"No—no: they shall not—they shall not!" screamed forth Octavia: and, falling upon her knees at her sister's feet, she gazed up with a sudden expression of frenzied terror settling upon her countenance so marble pale. "Pauline—Pauline—you will not let me go!—you will not let me be torn from you! They will place me upon the rack—they will subject me to the torture—they will put out my eyes—they will cut off my tongue—they will tear my flesh with red-hot pincers——"

"O horror! she is going mad again—mad!—mad!" shrieked Pauline, her own brain reeling with delirium as she thus gave unguarded and uncontrollable vent to her mortal fear.

"Mad! mad!" echoed Octavia, starting up to her feet like a body suddenly galvanized: and ex-

tending her arms towards the three men, who were slowly advancing farther into the room, she cried, "Avaunt, wretches! I know ye but too well! Ye are the myrmidons of the Prince—ye are the same who slew the young princes in the Tower centuries ago—ye are gifted with immortal life that ye may wreak immortal injury—ye are fiends in human shape. Avaunt! avaunt!"

And while the colour mounted to her cheeks, through the intensity of excitement, and her eyes glared with appalling wildness, and her bosom rose and fell with rapid convulsive heavings—or rather, stifled sobs—she stood in the midst of that apartment, her fine form drawn up to its full height, and her arms still extended with the air of a Pythoness looking into a terrible futurity.

"Octavia—my beloved Octavia—calm yourself, I implore you!" exclaimed Pauline, stricken with a frightful remorse at the unguarded expressions to which she had given utterance with respect to her sister's mental affliction.

"It is for you to calm yourself likewise, dear young lady," said Mr. Page, taking her by one hand, while Julia caught hold of her by the other. "Pray compose yourself—be t-anquil!" continued the ex-bagman, with an officiousness in his attempt at consolation which would have at once excited the suspicions of Pauline had she enjoyed the use of her discriminative powers at the moment.

"Yes—for heaven's sake tranquillise yourself!" said Mrs. Page; and as she and her husband both persisted in holding Pauline by the arms, under the semblance of administering solace and bestowing friendly attentions upon her, she was in fact retained a prisoner in their grasp.

This was no doubt the signal previously agreed upon between the treacherous couple and the mad-doctor's emissaries: for while Pauline was struggling to escape from the hold which they maintained upon her, the three men seized on Octavia and began dragging her from the room.

"Let me go, I command you—let me go, I implore you!" exclaimed Pauline, with desperate efforts to escape from Page and his wife—while Octavia's screams were suddenly hushed by one of the men placing his hand upon her mouth.

"You will do yourself an injury, dear young lady—pray be tranquil!" cried Page, forcing Pauline down into an arm-chair.

The wretched girl beheld the ruffian gagging her unhappy sister as his two companions forced her out of the room, despite the tremendous efforts which she made to escape from their power: then a sudden dizziness came over Pauline—everything disappeared from her view—every sound died away in her ears—and she fainted!

When she awoke to consciousness once more, it seemed as if she were slowly recovering from the effects of a hideous night-mare: but as her ideas gradually arranged themselves in her mind, a gathering wildness, mingled with terror, appeared upon her countenance;—and when she cast her looks with an expression of hurried and anxious inquiry around, and saw Page and his wife bending over her—but beheld *not* the dear object whom those searching glances sought—all the heart-rending reality of the previous scene burst upon her comprehension! Then, with a wild shriek, she started up—but staggered immediately beneath the overwhelming weight of her dire affliction;—and, falling upon her knees, she extended her clasped hands towards Page, exclaiming, "Tell me, sir—tell me what they have done with my sister!"

"Dear young lady, pray tranquillise yourself," said the ex-bagman. "Look upon me and my wife—that is to say, Mrs. Page—as your sincere and devoted friends, who will see your sister's wrongs avenged——"

"But what have they done with her?—where is she gone?" demanded Pauline, springing up from her suppliant posture, and speaking with a petulance indicative of the most cruel suspense and nervous impatience.

"I am as ignorant as yourself, my dear Miss Clarendon, upon those points," replied the ex-bagman. "Am I not, Mrs. P.?"

"Oh! then Octavia is torn away from me—and I am alone—alone!" cried the wretched, wretched Pauline, cutting short the answer which Julia was just commencing: and, falling back into the arm-chair, she covered her face with her hands and burst into an agony of weeping.

Mr. and Mrs. Page proffered their hypocritical consolations: but the blow which had stricken the young maiden so suddenly and so heavily, was not to be mitigated in its effects by any words or human solace, however sincere and however replete with sympathy that language might be. Therefore, although she suspected not for a single moment the treacherous part which her false friends had been playing, she refused all the consolatory suggestions which they pretended to offer her: she would not listen to their proposal that she should pass the night at their house—she was equally peremptory in declining the offer that Julia made to remain and take care of her;—but hastening up to her own chamber, she locked the door—and, finging herself more than half distracted upon the bed, gave way to all the violence of a grief which human language has no power to describe.

CHAPTER CLXXXVI.

AN EVENING AT CARLTON HOUSE.

A MONTH had elapsed since the occurrences related in the preceding chapter; and it was now the middle of smiling, warm, and sunny May.

Once more must we conduct our readers to the private apartment of the Prince of Wales,—that apartment which he had not ceased to render serviceable to his intrigues and voluptuous enjoyments, although a wife now slept beneath the roof of Carlton House.

But into that chamber so luxuriously fitted up, and having the advantage of the private staircase,—into that room embellished with equivocal pictures, we say, the footsteps of the Princess Caroline had not yet penetrated.

Their Royal Highnesses still ostensibly occupied the same bed-chamber: that is to say, the Prince was wont to pass the night with his wife when he was not too tipsy to seek her presence there, or when he was not more agreeably engaged in his own private apartment. But as these occurrences happened somewhat frequently, it may be taken upon an average that his Royal Highness honoured the Princess with his company about four nights out of

the seven in every week that had as yet elapsed since the matrimonial knot was tied. His insulting neglect and cruel indifference had begun full early, and were increasing daily and hourly: but still the Princess complained not to *him!* Nevertheless, she *had* a confidant to whom she unbosomed all her thoughts;—and that viper whom she thus unconsciously fostered in her bosom, was Lady Jersey.

But we have not yet reached that point when it will be necessary for us to enter upon details so painful and incidents so heart-rending that we already tremble in anticipation of the tremendous task we have yet to fulfil. For the present we have to record another of the manifold voluptuous diversions in which it so frequently pleased his Royal Highness to indulge.

It was, then, as we have already stated, in the middle of the smiling month of May—and at about ten o'clock in the evening—that the Prince of Wales was engaged in the contemplation of a somewhat singular spectacle of which his private apartment was the scene.

The heavy hangings were drawn over the windows—the wax-candles were lighted—and the atmosphere of the chamber was perfumed with the choice flowers that filled the porcelain vases. His Royal Highness, who had not long quitted the dinner-table, was elegantly dressed in evening costume: his countenance was flushed not only with drinking, but likewise by the exciting scene on which his eyes were gloatingly fixed.

For on a tight-rope fastened across the room, at a distance of about three feet from the floor, a trio of beauteous creatures were dancing in a style which combined all the fascinating graces of the art with the most exquisite refinement of sensual provocation.

Through the gauzy dresses which the three charmers wore, the eye could almost trace and follow all the flowing outlines of those forms that were so admirable in their symmetry and so supple in all their movements. To the flexible grace of the swan's neck might be added the coiling power of the serpent, as the attributes of the lovely shapes that glided floatingly over the gently yielding rope. Never was elegance of motion more enchantingly blended with the soft sensuousness of amorous looks, than in the performance of those three accomplished votaries of the Terpsichorean art: never was the classic poesy of flowing attitude more effectively warmed into voluptuousness, than when these dancers adapted the varying expression of their ravishing countenances to the silent harmony of their movements.

It was a species of physical coquetry appealing to the sense in every undulation of the form—in every gesture of the arms—in every step of the feet—in every glance shot forth from the eyes—in every look assumed by the features—in every smile that shone sunnily upon the lips. Now, as if upborne by some invisible power, the exquisite forms floated airily along the rope which the classically moulded feet appeared not to touch: now with slow, measured, and surpassingly graceful curves and inflections of the body, the superb contours of the bust would be altogether revealed:—and now the gradual rounding of the arms and their elevation over the head, would display to ineffable advantage their finished proportions and the ravishing beauty of the hands. Or the eyes, having suddenly flashed forth glances of burning desire, would by degrees mitigate the brilliancy of their lightnings and melt into the warm and continuous tenderness of an autumnal sunset,—so that the looks which at first dazzled, penetrated, and bewildered, now inspired feelings of delicious rapture and sensuous softness. At the same time, perhaps, the lips would part in their moist redness, like a luscious fruit of the tropics, and slowly reveal teeth of pearly purity.

Then, again, the dancers would balance themselves with the points of their feet upon the rope;—those feet, so pliant and so yielding, stretched out, or rather *downward*, in such a manner that they seemed to form the unbroken and tapering continuation of the leg itself, without a joint: and in this attitude, the difficulty of maintaining which appeared to demand no additional effort, would they remain for upwards of a minute, throwing into their forms all the poetic grace of the Greek statues. Then, resuming their wavy, floating, flowing movements, they would sustain such a perfect uniformity of motion, attitude, and even look, that it appeared as if the two were but the shadows of the one. Thus, in a thousand little ways and with all the skill and artifice of that which we have above denominated a *physical coquetry*, did those three syren-dancers detail as it were beauty after beauty, and display charm after charm, to the enraptured view of their royal spectator.

And beautiful indeed were the females who thus exhibited their accomplishments and developed their fascinations in the presence of his Royal Highness. They were young—and, although not virtuous, had lost nothing of the first freshness of youth. No artificial hue gave that bloom to their cheeks: no cosmetic was needed to enhance the brilliant transparency and dazzling whiteness of their skin. Their flesh was firm and plump to the eye; their shapes depended not upon the compressure of the corset to mark the flowing outlines or sustain the well-developed contours. Mingled grace and voluptuousness, elegance and soft lubricity, rendered them charming as dancers and desirable as women;—and the Prince, doubtless knowing beforehand how agreeable would be the recreation which Germain had thus provided for him, was resolved to be alone in its enjoyment. None of his boon companions were therefore present at the enchanting spectacle: the royal profligate had it all to himself!

For nearly an hour did the exhibition last,—broken by occasional intervals of repose on the part of the dancers, when they descended from the rope and partook of the champagne which the Prince poured out for them with his own hand. Nor did he fail to bestow upon them the most fervid caresses, and manifest his appreciation of their exquisite beauty by means of tender dalliance and toyings. Then, when the performance was concluded and the three dancers were in reality unable to conceal their weariness any longer, the Prince made them draw lots to decide who should remain as his companion for the rest of the night. The delicate point being duly settled, the two unlucky ones took their leave of the Prince and departed by means of the private staircase; while the fortunate young lady on whom the lot fell, remained alone with his Royal Highness.

The Prince now rang the bell to give some orders to Germain ere he retired for the night: and in a few moments the discreet and faithful Frenchman made his appearance.

"You will request the Countess of Jersey to inform her Royal Highness," said the Prince, "that I shall be compelled to sit up until a very late hour for the purpose of examining a mass of papers relative to the Duchy of Cornwall. Her Royal Highness will thence understand that I intend to remain in my own apartment to-night. You may now retire, Germain."

"May it please your Royal Highness," said the valet, "a person who has been waiting for the last two hours, earnestly besought me to become the bearer of this note. I assured him that your Royal Highness was exceedingly occupied with important business——"

"And so I have been," exclaimed the Prince, bestowing a smile upon the dancing-girl who was seated near him. "But where is this note?—and who is the individual?"

Germain handed his royal master a sealed letter, —observing at the same time, "The gentleman declines giving his name, and is even careful to conceal his countenence as much as he can."

The Prince took the note and opened it in an idle, leisurely manner: but the instant that his eyes caught a glimpse of the signature, a serious expression seised as it were upon his features;—and, with a degree of interest as absorbing as it was suddenly excited, he read the following lines:—

"Your Royal Highness will remember the solemn pledge which you gave me on a particular occasion,—a pledge to the effect that when the proper time should arrive, your Royal Highness would assist me in the accomplishment of that aim which can alone render life tolerable. May I therefore implore your Royal Highness to fulfil the promise so generously made?—and as my suspense is too acute to brook delay ere I receive from the lips of your Royal Highness a reiteration of that promise, I humbly but earnestly beseech the favour of a few moments' audience this evening.

"THE RESUSCITATED."

Having perused this note, the Prince tore it up into small pieces, which he threw under the grate. He then reflected profoundly for upwards of a minute,—deliberating within himself whether he should grant the interview solicited, or not. But suddenly resolving upon the affirmative course, he rose from his seat—apologised to the dancing-girl for being compelled to quit her for a little while—and hastened to the Red Drawing Room, where he was accustomed to receive visitors upon private business. Germain then proceeded to the waiting-room to conduct the stranger to the presence of his royal master; and in a few minutes a tall man, enveloped in a cloak (despite the warmth of the weather), and holding a large silk handkerchief up to his face, was introduced into the Red Drawing Room.

Germain immediately retired;—and the Prince, walking straight up to the visitor, said in a low and agitated tone, "Have you not acted most imprudently, Mr. Ramsey, in coming hither?"

"I hope that your Royal Highness will not frown upon me for the great liberty which I have taken," observed the resuscitated criminal, withdrawing the handkerchief which he had been holding up to his nose as if he were labouring under a violent cold: "but I have only just returned to London, after an absence of more than two months from England——"

"Ah! you have been out of the country, then," exclaimed the Prince. "Why, in the name of heaven, did *you* not remain abroad altogether?"

"It was my original design to proceed to America and thence write to your Royal Highness to implore your generous though secret intervention with the Government in my behalf," said Ramsey. "But circumstances occurred at sea, which compelled me to return to England——"

"And what were those circumstances?" demanded the Prince, impatiently. "Let me know everything—explain your exact position—state what you have to fear, and what to hope—and then I shall be enabled to judge how far I can assist you. But do not over-rate my influence with the Government, Mr. Ramsey: for, if you know anything of the present state of parties and political interests in this country, you must be aware that the Prince of Wales," added his Royal Highness bitterly, "is a mere cypher in the estimation of the Ministry. Nevertheless," he hastened to observe, "there may be ways and means of serving you: for what I cannot accomplish *myself*, I often achieve through the influence of those noblemen who enjoy the confidence of the Cabinet and are yet secretly devoted to me."

"I will explain as briefly as I can, the circumstances which compelled me to return to England," said Ramsey.

The Prince flung himself upon a sofa, and pointed to a chair, which the resuscitated criminal took.

"Proceed, then," said the heir-apparent. "I am prepared to listen attentively."

"It was in the early part of March," continued Ramsey, "that I embarked at Liverpool on board a schooner, named the *Fire-fly*, and bound for the United States. I was known on board as Mr. Gustavus Wakefield; and no one entertained the slightest suspicion that there was anything peculiar connected with my history. A month elapsed, during which our course was delayed by tempestuous weather: but we were nearing the place of destination, when we came in collision with a pirate brig, called the *Royal George* All the crew of the *Fire-fly* were slain in the conflict, with the exception of a common sailor and myself; and we were taken prisoners by the pirates. This was the first occurrence so specially ominous to myself, which had taken place since I quitted Liverpool: for, lo and behold! in the persons of the two chiefs of the freebooters, I recognised a couple of scoundrels with whom circumstances had made me acquainted in England."

"Then they were British pirates—eh?" exclaimed the Prince, interrogatively. "And they had the consummate insolence to name their ship the *Royal George?* Did I not understand you that such was the case?"

"Your Royal Highness is correct," responded the resuscitated criminal. "The real truth is that the two men to whom I have alluded, were compromised in some of the details of the affair which threw me into the grasp of justice—and sent me to the scaffold," added Ramsey, his voice suddenly sinking to a scarcely audible tone. "Joseph Warren, better known to the world of crime by the

name of the Magsman—and Stephen Price, notorious under the appellation of the Big Beggarman——But your Royal Highness will pardon me," cried Ramsey, abruptly checking himself, as he saw a sudden and remarkable change come over the countenance and the manner of the Prince: "I know that I ought not even to allude to such wretches in your presence—but the circumstances of my narrative constrained me thus to mention names well calculated to shock your ears——"

"Do not pause to offer apologies, Mr. Ramsey," exclaimed his Royal Highness, now recovering from the effects of the various disagreeable reminiscences which the abrupt mention of the name of Joe Warren, *alias* the Magsman, had excited in his mind. "It is impossible to repress a feeling of disgust at the thought of such men——But pray continue your narrative. You were telling me that you recognised those two ruffians;—and I suppose, therefore, that they recognised you also?"

"They did, your Royal Highness," returned Ramsey; "and I was compelled to implore and beseech them, almost on bended knees—but certainly with tearful eyes—not to betray my tremendous secret."

"Did they menace you on that head?" asked the Prince.

"No: on the contrary, they promised fairly enough," observed the resuscitated: "but what reliance could I place in such miscreants?"

"Miscreants, indeed!" muttered the heir-apparent to himself. "Pray continue your history, sir," he exclaimed aloud. "I presume that they compelled *you* to turn pirate?"

"There was no leisure for such a proceeding on their part, may it please your Royal Highness," answered Ramsey: "for within a few hours after the freebooters had captured and sunk the *Fire-fly*, one of his Majesty's ships came in sight. The *Royal George* vainly endeavoured to escape from the British frigate; and the result was that the pirates were captured by the *Diana*——"

"The *Diana*!" echoed the Prince, instantaneously recollecting that this was the very same frigate in which Tim Meagles had been so unceremoniously packed off out of the country.

"That was the name of his Majesty's frigate on board of which I was transferred along with the rest," answered Ramsey. "It was in virtue of a compact proposed by the captain of the *Diana*, that the affair proved a bloodless one; and the only persons whom the captain regarded as pirates were Joseph Warren and Stephen Price. They were placed in irons, to be kept until the ship should return to England, in order to take their trial according to the usual routine—the result of which will probably be——"

"Their death at Execution Dock, I hope," added the Prince abruptly. "The sooner such rascals are put out of the way, the better. But did you see on board the *Diana* any one bearing the name of Meagles?"

"Certainly, may it please your Royal Highness," answered Ramsey: "and it was in consequence of something which occurred relative to himself that the *Diana* eventually put back to England."

"Explain the circumstances," said the Prince, wishing to see whether Meagles had proved at all communicative to his fellow-passengers on board the *Diana*.

"About ten days after the incident with the pirates," proceeded the resuscitated criminal, "we were overtaken by a fast-sailing cruiser, just as we were within sight of American land; and this vessel brought out despatches for the captain of the *Diana*, ordering him to return to England forthwith. It was well known on board that Mr. Meagles had been sent away in the first instance on account of some treasonable affairs in which he was supposed to have been implicated at home—at least such was the report,—and the original instructions of the captain were to land him in America. But the counter-orders seemed to imply that he had either been pardoned, or that he was innocent of the matter charged against him: for the captain, after reading the despatches, told him that he need no longer consider himself a prisoner, and that he was to be taken back to his native land."

"Accursed Letitia Lade!" muttered the Prince to himself. "It was you, wretch as you are, that forced me into the necessity of pleading at the Home Office for the pardon of Meagles!" he added, in the same musing tone to himself, but still apostrophising the absent Amazon.

"Did your Royal Highness make an observation?" asked Ramsey, fancying that he heard the Prince saying something.

"Yes—no—nothing of importance," replied the heir-apparent. "Were you and Meagles friendly during the voyage home?"

"I saw but little of him, your Royal Highness," answered the resuscitated. "The truth is that I affected to be seriously indisposed, and was kindly accommodated with a cabin to myself, in which I remained almost constantly: for I need hardly remind your Royal Highness that I was in an incessant dread of either being recognised, or else of hearing something which might throw me into a confusion calculated to engender the strangest suspicions. Moreover, Meagles had so ingratiated himself with the officers of the ship, that even before his pardon arrived, it seemed that he had been treated by them with the utmost consideration and attention,—dining at their mess—constantly in their company—smoking, drinking, singing, and card playing——"

"And after his pardon *did* overtake him, I suppose he was more sought after and caressed than ever?" said the Prince, interrogatively. "But—to return entirely to your own affairs," he added, without waiting for an answer, "did you escape recognition after all?—or did those villains, Warren and his accomplice, betray you?"

"I escaped recognition—and they did not betray me," replied Philip Ramsey. "But when we all landed yesterday at Portsmouth, Joseph Warren took the opportunity to place his finger upon his lip and make me a sign which was significant enough."

"What did he mean?" demanded the Prince.

"I will explain myself to your Royal Highness," returned Ramsey. "The principal witnesses against this Warren and Stephen Price relative to the destruction of the *Fire-fly* and the murder of the crew, are myself and the sailor who, though seriously wounded in the fray, has since completely recovered. It is true that a couple of Warren's men, named Watkins and Bradley, have agreed to turn king's evidence: but their testimony would be to some extent suspicious, from the very posi-

tion they were in as officers of the pirate-ship. Therefore the evidence of myself and the man Paul Winnington, the surviving sailor of the *Firefly*, will be needed upon the trial. The captain of the *Diana*, believing me to be a respectable merchant, allowed me at once to come to London, on my solemn pledge to appear as a witness when the Admiralty Court shall require my presence;—and Warren, doubtless having heard it whispered that such was the fact, gave me as we landed the significant look of which I have spoken and which expressed the word '*Beware*' as eloquently as a glance and gesture can possibly perform the part of the language of the tongue."

"And now what do you propose to do, Mr. Ramsey?—and what do you wish me to undertake in your behalf?" asked the heir-apparent.

"My pardon, great Prince!—my pardon!" exclaimed the unhappy man, clasping his hands together, while the big tear-drops rolled down his handsome though somewhat care-worn countenance.

"But if you obtained it, would you show yourself boldly abroad again in the world?" demanded the Prince.

"No—never—never!" hastily replied the resuscitated. "But I should at least enjoy the assurance of personal safety, and not tremble at every searching look that might accidentally be fixed upon me."

"Are you afraid that even if you were recognised by any one who had known you formerly, such an individual would be stern, and harsh, and cruel enough to give you up to justice after all you have undergone?"

"Yes—oh! yes—I am convinced of it!" exclaimed Ramsey, with considerable excitement both in his tone and manner. "First, there is Sir Richard Stamford himself, who would show me no mercy: then there is a certain nobleman of lofty rank and great wealth, who discovered that I was the object of his wife's tenderest and best affections, and who indeed was the main cause of my abrupt departure from England—a course to which he urged me by means of the most terrible threats of vengeance."

"What! did this amour take place *after* your trial and——"

"And execution, your Royal Highness would add," said Ramsey, in a low deep tone which was also penetrated with a slight accent of bitterness. "But no matter—I must make up my mind to adopt that *one* tremendous incident in my life as the date which closes one portion of my career and marks the opening of another. It is as it were the date of death and life!"

"And a noble lady loved you since that fatal era in your existence?" mused the Prince, without heeding the observations which the criminal had just made. "But she was doubtless ignorant at the time——"

"Oh! yes—she was ignorant *then* of my accursed fate!" exclaimed Ramsey. "And I was so happy in the enjoyment of her love—and she had consented to fly with me—yes, to leave her husband for my sake——"

"Your amour was deeply tinged with romance, Mr. Ramsey," observed the Prince.

"Ah! it was indeed characterised by extraordinary circumstances," pursued the criminal; "and not the least of all was the fact that this high-born lady, so eminently beautiful and of such impassioned temperament, came a virgin to my arms!"

"A virgin!" echoed the Prince. "I thought you told me she was married to a nobleman who persecuted you on her account."

"And such is indeed the truth," responded Ramsey. "But although she had been married upwards of six years, she was still as innocent, pure, and chaste in body as she was fervid, impassioned, and glowing in mind."

"You astonish me!" exclaimed the Prince. "Do I know this heroine of so strange a history?"

"Your Royal Highness knows her well," answered Ramsey. "But I dare not say more upon the subject——"

"Oh! how cruelly you have piqued my curiosity," exclaimed the Prince. "I would give worlds to know who this lady is! Will you tell me her name? Ten thousand, thousand times do I swear not to betray your confidence—and I shall positively esteem it a favour if you will comply with my request. I never in all my life experienced so vivid an interest in another person's amour as in yours."

"If your Royal Highness commands me to reveal this secret," began Ramsey,—"I have no alternative——"

"Then I *do* command you!" cried the Prince, every lineament of his countenance expressing the most lively curiosity. "Speak—tell me who was this marvellous beauty—this heroine of so romantic a history?"

"But what opinion will your Royal Highness form of *me*, if I betray that noble lady?" said Ramsey, still hesitating.

"It is in the strictest confidence—and no harm can ensue," rejoined the Prince. "Come—tell me quickly—who was she?"

"The Countess of Desborough," answered Ramsey.

"What!—the Countess of Desborough?" exclaimed His Royal Highness, starting up from the sofa as if with the sudden influence of an electric shock. "Is it possible?—the proud, imperious, cruel, and prudish Eleanor of Desborough?"

"I have told your Royal Highness the truth," responded Ramsey, somewhat amazed at the unexpected degree of excitement which the revelation of the noble lady's name had produced upon the Prince.

"You astound me!—I am struck as with a consternation!" continued the heir-apparent, his looks verifying the words which he was uttering. "But, ah! now a light breaks in upon me—you have explained the mystery which enveloped the domestic life of the Earl and Countess of Desborough—the circumstance of their occupying separate chambers ——Yes—I understand it all now—the miserable husband is impotent!"

"That is the tremendous secret of the Desboroughs," observed Ramsey. "But I implore your Royal Highness to place an eternal seal upon your lips——"

"Such an injunction is unnecessary, Mr. Ramsey," interrupted the Prince, still scarcely able to throw off the consternation of amazement which had seized upon him. "And so the brilliant Eleanor was your mistress—your paramour?" he continued in a musing tone. "Well, methinks that you have trained her to a path which she has not since shown

any inexperience or hesitation in pursuing: for the last time I heard of her, was about a month or five weeks ago, when she was in company with a certain Lord Florimel—a baby-faced, beardless, pretty young fellow, who was dressed for the nonce in feminine apparel."

"Indeed!" ejaculated Ramsey, with an accent of bitterness in his voice: then, almost immediately, he added with his usual tone and manner. "But of course I can be nothing to her *now*—unless it be an object of horror and loathing."

The Prince began to pace the room in a thoughtful mood: it was evident that some new idea, engendered by the discourse which had just taken place, was uppermost in his mind;—and he was deliberating how to give expression to it. Ramsey followed him with his eyes; and in the breast of the resuscitated criminal arose a vague suspicion that the heir-apparent longed to break to him some project which he nevertheless knew not precisely how to broach.

At length the Prince stopped short suddenly within a couple of paces of the spot where Ramsey was seated;—and, looking the resuscitated criminal full and even significantly in the face, he said, "Do *you* care for the Countess of Desborough *now*?"

A portion of the truth flashed in an instant to the comprehension of Ramsey: he saw that the heir-apparent had some design relative to the beautiful Countess, and that he wished to make *him* the agent and tool to carry it out.

"I care nothing for her ladyship *now*," was accordingly the reply given by the astute criminal.

"And I suppose that after what I have told you relative to her new amour—with Lord Florimel, I mean," said the Prince, "you would not be particular how you even took a part against her?"

"I should certainly be well pleased to avenge

myself on her for her perfidy towards me," returned Ramsey, the Prince's question itself furnishing the cue to the answer which was sure to be most welcome.

"Now listen to me, Mr. Ramsey," continued the heir-apparent,—"and I will reveal a certain secret to your ears, as you have confided a secret to mine. In a word, I love this haughty, beauteous, and impassioned Countess of Desborough: but she hates me! More than once has she been on the very verge of falling into my arms—and accident has saved her! The measures which I have adopted to ensnare her, have rendered me the object of her aversion. That such is her feeling towards me, I am well assured. To be avenged upon her, then—to gratify my own passion at the same time,—to humble *her*, and appease the desires which boil up like a lava-stream within me whenever I suffer my imagination to gloat upon her image,—*these* are now the aims which I have in view, and which yourself can assist me in carrying into execution."

"I am at the command of your Royal Highness," said Ramsey, scarcely able to conceal the delight which he experienced at thus finding himself taken as it were alike into the confidence and the service of the Prince. "Your Royal Highness can restore *me* to comparative happiness, and at all events to certain security;—and in return I will become your slave, for any purpose—no matter whether of good or of evil."

"You pledge yourself, then, to aid me in the design which I have broached?" said the Prince, his imagination now filled with a thousand voluptuous ideas relative to the beauteous Eleanor of Desborough.

"I pledge myself, body and soul, to the service of your Royal Highness," responded Ramsey.

"Then let this be the compact between us," rejoined the Prince: "that when you, by means of any course of proceeding which you may think fit to adopt, ensure me the enjoyment of both love and vengeance with regard to the Countess of Desborough,—in that same hour, I say, shall the document containing your full pardon be placed in your hands. I will procure it to-morrow—and therefore the sooner you perform *your* part of the agreement, the more cheerfully shall I acquit myself of *mine*."

"Be it so, great Prince," exclaimed Ramsey: "the grass shall not grow under my feet."

The resuscitated criminal then took leave of the heir-apparent, and issued forth from Carlton House, enveloped in the ample cloak, with his hat slouching over his countenance, and holding the silk pocket-handkerchief up to his mouth.

"O haughty, cruel, and imperious Countess of Desborough!" exclaimed the Prince aloud, the moment the door of the apartment had closed behind Philip Ramsey: "the hour of vengeance approaches! Thou shalt yield thyself up to my embraces—I will revel in thy charms—and then, when I have drunk to satiety of the cup of bliss which thou shalt fill for me, I will spurn thee from me as the paramour of a wretch who had passed through the hands of the common hangman! This will be a glorious vengeance, Eleanor—a glorious vengeance!" cried the Prince, rubbing his hands gleefully. "But, ah! the return of that fellow Meagles—and the scrape which this scoundrel Warren has got himself into again,—*these* are occurrences which damp the pleasure that I should otherwise enjoy in such undiluted deliciousness when I think of my passion and my hatred—my love and my spite—my desire and my vengeance, in respect to thee, thou beauteous Eleanor! But let me not suffer gloomy presentiments and evil apprehensions to mar the joy which is in store for me. Meagles is powerless: he can do nothing against me. While *those documents* were within his reach, he could sting me with the venom of a viper: now all the efforts of his malignity will not be more galling than the bite of a gnat. And as for this Warren—well, what does he know?—what can he do?—what can he say? That his wife has been my paramour——Ah! the English public are so accustomed to hear such tales concerning their future King, that they cease to experience surprise—and they know full well that I do not care a damn for their displeasure."

Having arrived at this very satisfactory conclusion, the heir-apparent to the British throne suddenly remembered that the dancing-girl was waiting for him in his own private apartment;—and he accordingly proceeded thither, to gratify in the arms of the Terpsichorean votary those desires which had been so excited by the idea and the hope of speedily possessing the Countess of Desborough.

CHAPTER CLXXXVII.

THE CONVERSATION.

It was on the day following the incidents just related, and at about two o'clock in the afternoon, that we shall find the Duchess of Devonshire alighting from her carriage at the mansion of the Earl and Countess of Desborough in Berkeley Square.

Eleanor was at home: indeed, she was seated alone in the drawing-room at the moment when her friend Georgiana was announced.

"It is quite an age since I have seen you, my dearest Eleanor," said the Duchess, warmly pressing the hand of the charming Countess. "Four or five weeks—and you have been all the time at Stamford Manor——"

"It is indeed five weeks since we last met," observed Eleanor: "and by-the-bye, my dear, Georgiana, I must give you a scolding for the serious manner in which you might have suffered me to be compromised——"

"Oh! I recollect now," exclaimed her Grace, bursting out into as merry a laugh as the restrictions of etiquette would possibly allow. "That affair in Chancery Lane — with Miss Plantagenet——".

"Your scrape-grace cousin Lord Florimel," interrupted the Countess of Desborough, with a rather serious look. "Do you know, Georgiana, that it was too bad of you?"

"My dear friend, there was no opportunity for me to give you a hint—especially before that horrible character Lady Lade——"

"And yet you yourself introduced Lord Florimel to me as Miss Plantagenet," said Eleanor, still preserving a tone of remonstrance; "and I am o:

course certain that you were well aware who it really was all the time."

"Yes—but at that moment I did not know that Lady Lade was in the secret," returned the Duchess. "However, I admit that it was imprudent and foolish on my part: but really I did it more as a joke than with any other motive—and you are well aware, dear Eleanor, that I could not have had a sinister or malignant reason with regard to yourself. I love you too well, as my best and dearest friend, to injure a hair of your head," added the generous-hearted though gay, giddy, and profligate Duchess.

"I believe you, Georgiana," said Eleanor, taking her friend's hand and pressing it warmly. "Anything more, then, that I may remark upon the subject will not be in anger: indeed, *that* is a sentiment which I have not entertained all along. It was merely a little annoyance—nothing more. But figure to yourself the embarrassments into which the incident plunged me, when I assure you that, fully believing the beautiful and well-behaved Miss Plantagenet to be precisely what she chose to represent herself, I innocently and ingenuously made her my companion in a visit to the serious-minded, secluded, and retirement-loving Marchioness of Bellenden. The Marchioness, you know, is a particular friend of mine; and I respect as much as I love and esteem her. Not for worlds, then, would I have been the instrument of carrying vexation, scandal, and annoyance into her house. But, behold! some evil spirit must have prompted me to take the false Miss Plantagenet with me to Bellenden Priory on that occasion; and the same unlucky train of circumstances led to the exposure of the cheat——"

"I suppose that the Marchioness of Bellenden was horrified," exclaimed Georgiana, laughing heartily. "But she could not have imagined that you had knowingly and wilfully taken a disguised lover to her house?"

"Fortunately an explanation had already been given showing how Miss Plantagenet—or rather Lord Florimel—became my companion," continued Lady Desborough: "but that explanation had likewise revealed to the Marchioness the fact that the young nobleman had shared Mrs. Fitzherbert's bed at the house in Chancery Lane. Thus, although I was completely exonerated, the reputation of Mrs. Fitzherbert was as totally sacrificed in the esteem of Lady Bellenden."

"But her ladyship, with her retired habits and truly Christian charity, will not make the delicate incident a topic of conversation elsewhere?" observed the Duchess interrogatively.

"Assuredly not," answered the Countess. "Besides, she was too much alarmed at the exposure which took place in her own drawing-room not to be anxious to hush it up as fully as possible. There is a young lady of the name of Foster staying with her; and this charming girl—for lovely and amiable she assuredly is—was once thrown in Lord Florimel's way in some manner that left no very agreeable impression upon her mind. Accordingly, upon entering the room where your scapegrace cousin and myself were seated with the Marchioness, that young lady instantaneously recognised him and proclaimed who he was. His lordship fled from the apartment in a state of confusion and dismay which you can perhaps more readily conceive than I can describe: but in precipitating himself down the stairs—for a headlong flight it assuredly must have been—his foot slipped and he fell with a violent concussion against a porcelain vase or some such ornament. He was taken up senseless—and I am bound to declare that the Marchioness, suddenly forgetting all her resentment, was profoundly afflicted at an accident which we all at first believed to have proved fatal. Without alarming the household, we raised him in our arms—bore him between us into the room whence he had just before fled so precipitately—and bestowed upon him all the attentions which our fears in his behalf could possibly suggest. He rallied in a short time: but it was evident that his reason was temporarily—if not altogether—impaired. Nevertheless, our grief at the accident was mitigated on finding that it had not proved fatal upon the spot."

"And then, I suppose, came the question of what you were to do with him?" said the Duchess of Devonshire inquiringly.

"Precisely so," responded Eleanor. "The Marchioness began to perceive all the inconvenience and the probable scandal that might arise from giving the injured nobleman an asylum beneath her roof;—and it was therefore suggested by myself that his lordship should be removed as speedily and also as privately as possible to his own residence in Piccadilly. But then arose the embarrassing question, how was he to be conveyed thither? If I took him in my carriage, his servants would naturally conceive the most injurious suspicions relative to myself;—and if the Marchioness sent him in her own carriage, her own domestics accompanying the vehicle could not fail to learn who the disguised invalid was. In either case the most unpleasant impressions would be made concerning the Marchioness or myself."

"It was indeed a bewildering affair—a perfect dilemma," observed the Duchess of Devonshire. "And how did you extricate yourselves from the difficulty at last?"

"The Marchioness resolved to take two of her servants into her confidence and explain to them that the young nobleman, after assuming female apparel in pursuance of some silly freak, had imposed alike upon herself and me. In fine," added the Countess of Desborough, "Lady Bellenden bade me return home and leave her to manage the affair in the best way she could. I called upon her next day and found that she had contrived to extricate herself from the perplexity in a way sufficiently satisfactory to herself: for in order that Lord Florimel's domestics should not ascertain at whose house their master had met with the accident while disguised in female apparel, the Marchioness had him removed to the abode of her own medical man, to whom she sent a note explaining the circumstances of the case."

"Admirably contrived!" exclaimed the Duchess. "I presume that you are aware that the young scapegrace has quitted London for a few weeks and repaired to the sea-side?"

"No—I had not learnt this circumstance," observed Eleanor. "I suppose that, on recovering from the effects of the accident, he was recommended to seek a change of air?"

"Something of that kind does he tell me in a note which I received from him a few days ago,

and which is dated from Dover," said the Duchess. "He states that a slight injury which he had sustained from a fall compelled him to repair to the sea-side to recruit his strength. Have you seen your friend the Marchioness of Bellenden lately?" inquired the Duchess, merely for the sake of continuing the discourse, in which there was a sudden pause after the previous observation.

"No—the Marchioness has left London for a short time," returned Eleanor. "I believe that her law-suit which is now verging upon its close, has compelled her to visit some provincial places where she expects to glean valuable information in aid of her cause. But I remember," added the Countess, laughing, "that I was to give you a scolding, Georgiana, for wilfully and wickedly placing me in such an awkward predicament with your scapegrace cousin."

"My dearest friend," exclaimed the Duchess, likewise smiling, but rather with a sly significancy than a positive gaiety, "if you never find yourself in a more perplexing or perilous dilemma than that one, you will indeed have reason to congratulate your good fortunes. The romantic adventure in which you were involved with my cousin Gabriel is nothing when compared with an incident that happened to me some time ago at the very country-seat which you have lately purchased."

"What! at Stamford Manor do you mean?" cried the Lady Desborough. "I never heard of your being there."

"And yet I passed a night within its walls about eight or ten weeks ago," continued the Duchess: "and I had a companion with me—one of the handsomest gallants of the age——"

"Ah! a light breaks in upon me!" interrupted Eleanor. "But is it possible that you were the lady who visited the Manor one evening with the Prince?"

"Such is the fact, my dear friend," responded the Duchess, smiling. "I do not fear to make you my confidant. Indeed, I have already confessed to you, upon a previous occasion, that there has existed a certain intimacy between myself and his Royal Highness—whom, by the bye, I have ceased to look upon with any favourable sentiment since his cruel and heartless conduct to our poor friend Fitzherbert. But how came you to learn that the Prince and a lady passed the night at Stamford Manor?"

"From the old couple who were in charge of the house when the Earl and myself first went to inspect it," answered the Countess. "They were full of the visit which his Royal Highness paid the Manor; and I can assure you, my dear Georgiana, that they were not sparing in the compliments which they lavished upon your beauty."

"I am much obliged to them," said the magnificent Duchess, smiling complacently as she turned her head for a moment to catch a glimpse of her splendid countenance in the nearest mirror. "But I hope that they did not suspect who I was?" she observed, with a sudden manifestation of anxiety.

"They entertained not the faintest idea of the truth in that respect," answered the Countess. "But how came you to incur the risk of so seriously compromising yourself?"

"I will narrate to you the whole adventure, my dear Eleanor, returned the Duchess; "and you will then see that there was one little episode in it far more perplexing, extraordinary, and romantic than your affair with the disguised Lord Florimel. But, by the bye," exclaimed Georgiana, as the sudden thought struck her, "did that worthy old couple at Stamford Manor ever tell you anything relative to a ghost which was alleged to have been seen at the house on the very evening of the visit of his Royal Highness and myself?"

"A ghost!" ejaculated the Countess, laughing. "No—I never was favoured with any tale of that nature. But I recollect, now you mention the circumstance, that old Mrs. Bryan one day commenced an anecdote of the kind in the presence of the Earl and myself; and his lordship cut her short by a request that no silly narratives of apparitions might ever be circulated in his household. I was therefore deprived of the exciting pleasure of hearing Mrs. Bryan's ghost story," added the beauteous Eleanor, still smiling gaily.

"Then you shall enjoy that pleasure now, my dear friend," rejoined the Duchess of Devonshire, continuing the discourse in the same semi-jocular and chatty strain. "But first I must tell you how the Prince and myself happened to be benighted and to take refuge at Stamford Manor. Some weeks ago I let you into the secret of all that had occurred relative to poor Octavia Clarendon. Well, you know that when she suddenly lost the use of her reason on visiting the Prince at Carlton House, his Royal Highness sent for me and I conveyed her to my villa in Buckinghamshire. The Prince, being greatly alarmed on her account, and feeling uneasy lest proper precautions should not be adopted to prevent her from escaping and making her wrongs public, followed me next morning to the villa. There he passed the rest of that day—but without seeing Octavia, whom I had already placed under the care of the discreet and trustworthy Dr. Clarges. Having assured himself that every necessary measure had been adopted to meet the distressing emergency, the Prince resolved to return to town in the evening; and he insisted that I should become his travelling-companion. As we were passing along the road in the vicinage of Stamford Manor, the carriage broke down: and, having learnt from a peasant who was journeying that way at the moment, that we might no doubt obtain an asylum at the Manor, which was merely occupied by an old couple charged with the care of it, the Prince persuaded me to act upon the suggestion. The Prince's servants were accordingly left to patch up the carriage as well as they could and take it back to Aylesbury, with instructions to get it repaired during the night and call for us early in the morning at the Manor. A short walk brought us to the front door of that mansion; and an asylum did we accordingly obtain. Now it happened that a certain Mr. and Mrs. Page were there at the time, on business connected with Sir Richard Stamford; and of this Mr. Page the Prince had some knowledge. In the course of conversation Mr. Page related to us that very ghost-story with which Mrs. Bryan was no doubt anxious to regale your ears when the Earl, as you just now informed me, cut short her old-womanish garrulity. The substance of the story was that while Mr. and Mrs. Page were occupied in the library of the mansion, they were suddenly visited by the apparition of that notorious criminal,

Philip Ramsey—the Aylesbury banker—who was hanged——"

The Countess of Desborough gave a convulsive start—while a ghastly, a hideous pallor seized upon her countenance: but her lips, that had suddenly become of an ashy hue, were compressed with a clenching tightness, as if to keep back the scream that rose to the very tip of her tongue.

"Heavens! what is the matter?" exclaimed the Duchess of Devonshire, literally bounding from her seat and catching her friend by the hand. "What ails you, my dearest Eleanor?—what ails you?"

"Nothing—a transitory indisposition—but it is gone," faultered the Countess, with a superhuman struggle to stifle the menaced outburst of agonised feelings which naturally accompanied the torturing reminiscences so abruptly awakened in her soul. "Pray proceed, Georgiana—pray proceed," she murmured, with quivering lip, while her whole frame still trembled like an aspen-leaf.

"Eleanor, in the name of all our friendship, what means this emotion?" demanded the Duchess. "You are not a child to be terrified by a ghost-story, which in the sequel will prove to have been nothing supernatural after all;—and you have *not* been seized with the sudden indisposition which you alleged as the means of tranquillising my fears concerning you. Tell me, then—tell me——"

"Oh! my beloved friend," exclaimed the Countess, now bursting into that flood of anguished weeping which would no longer be restrained; "I am very, very unhappy!"—and she threw herself upon the bosom of the Duchess.

"Compose your feelings, Eleanor—give not way to this dreadful grief!" said the generous-hearted Georgiana, in a tone of the most tender solace. "There! let me wipe those streaming eyes, as if I were your sister—for you know that I love you as well as if you were my sister. Giddy, dissipated, frail as I may be, Eleanor," added the Duchess in a voice full of a touching pathos, "I entertain nothing but the kindest feelings towards you."

"I know it, Georgiana—I know it," murmured the unhappy Countess, embracing her friend with the warmth of deepest gratitude: then, disengaging herself gently from Georgiana's arms, she wiped the tears from her countenance, saying in a firmer tone, "Yes—I am unhappy—very unhappy: but the time has now come,—accident has pointed it out—circumstances have indicated it,—when I must make a confidant of you."

"What! have you other secrets that weigh upon your mind, my poor Eleanor, in addition to the *one* tremendous sorrow that you revealed to me a few months ago?"—and the looks of the Duchess, as she thus spoke, were full of mingled sympathy and curiosity.

"Oh! yes—I have *other* secrets of a fearful nature—secrets which at times convulse my heart with a mortal anguish," exclaimed the Countess of Desborough, in a tone of concentrated bitterness. "But proceed with *your* narrative first, my dear Georgiana: tell me all that you have to narrate—and then I will pour forth my sorrows into your sympathising bosom."

"But wherefore ask me to return to a history which has become dull and even absurd in comparison with the tale of those afflictions which I am so anxious to hear from your lips?" demanded Georgiana.

"I have my reasons for the request which I have just made," responded Eleanor. "Continue your narrative, then, my dear friend—omit not a single detail—abridge not one particular;—and you will presently comprehend the motives which influence me in beseeching this favour at your hands."

"Be it as you say, Eleanor," remarked the Duchess, utterly at a loss to imagine how the history of her adventures at Stamford Manor could have any possible connexion with the woes of her friend.

By this time the Countess had regained a certain tranquillity of demeanour,—although the colour still remained absent from her cheeks of delicate olive complexion, and her bosom was every now and then convulsed with a stifled sob.

CHAPTER CLXXXVIII.

THE BED-ROOM SCENE AT STAMFORD MANOR.

"I WAS telling you, my dear Eleanor," continued the Duchess of Devonshire, "that a certain Mr. and Mrs. Page whom we found at the Manor, were full of the belief that they had seen the apparition of Philip Ramsey, the Aylesbury banker, who suffered the extreme penalty of the law some months ago at Newgate. Of course neither his Royal Highness nor myself put any faith in the tale,—ascribing the circumstance to the fevered or perhaps affrighted imaginations of two persons in whose minds the awful tragedy connected with the Manor was doubtless uppermost. Mr. Page, who possessed an inordinate love of hearing himself talk, entered elaborately upon the alleged occurrence, and even described with peculiar minuteness every feature of Ramsey's countenance. He, indeed, was one of the witnesses against that person—or at all events in some manner instrumental in bringing him to justice,—and he therefore knew his personal appearance well. It seemed that Ramsey was a very handsome young man, as the newspapers reported at the time: he was eight-and-twenty—tall and well-made—with a Grecian countenance—fine dark eyes—splendid teeth—and an olive complexion, a little more dusky than your own, dear Eleanor."

"Go on, Georgiana—go on," said the Countess, with the petulance of a nervousness torturingly poignant.

"This Mr. Page of whom I have been speaking," continued the Duchess, "not only described Ramsey's appearance with the minuteness arising from a personal knowledge of the man—but he likewise produced a portrait of the original."

"A portrait?" ejaculated Eleanor, to whose mind flashed the incident of *that* picture which was painted by George Woodfall, and the exhibition of which had revealed simultaneously to her husband and herself the real name and character of the guest whom *he* was entertaining and *she* was loving as Gustavus Wakefield.

"Yes — a miniature portrait," returned the Duchess, in answer to Lady Desborough's ejaculatory question. "It appeared that some one had found it between the mattresses in a bed-room; and it is therefore probable that the picture had been given by the criminal to Lady Stamford, who, you may remember, was his paramour. The

Prince and myself both examined the portrait; and it corresponded in every respect with the description which Mr. Page had previously given of Philip Ramsey. *'What a handsome young man he must have been!'* thought I to myself at the time; and I remember remarking that the noblest instead of the guiltiest feelings appeared to be stamped upon his brow. But how profoundly you sighed at that moment, Eleanor?—and now the colour is coming and going upon your cheeks a dozen times in a moment?"

"Do not heed my looks—nor regard my manner," said the Countess. "You shall know all presently—and then you will understand everything which now appears mysterious and unaccountable in my conduct. Proceed, dearest Georgiana—proceed, I implore you."

"I am now approaching the grand climax in my narrative," resumed the Duchess of Devonshire, after gazing for a few moments upon her friend with an expression of earnest curiosity and deep interest. "Having duly examined the miniature portrait and passed our observations upon it, his Royal Highness and myself retired to the chamber which had been prepared for our reception. It was the second room on the left-hand side of the long corridor——"

"The very chamber in which, as I have been told, Lady Stamford breathed her last," interjected the Countess of Desborough. "It has a dressing-room opening from one extremity, and a bath-room from the other."

"The same," rejoined the Duchess. "Well, to that apartment were we escorted by Mrs. Page, whose proffered services I rejected: for there was something bold, forward, and coarse in the woman's manner which I did not at all admire. I accordingly dismissed her at once; and the Prince retired to the dressing-room while I performed my own unaided night-toilette in the bed-chamber. Presently his Royal Highness re-appeared in a dressing-gown which Mr. Page's attention had doubtless provided; and he began to pay me some of those honied compliments which he knows so well how to lavish upon his favourites, when a strange noise startled us abruptly. We listened—the door of the bath-room opened—and a man appeared upon the threshold. Great heavens! what did I see? One glance was sufficient—a scream burst from my lips—and I threw myself into the arms of the Prince;—for the countenance which had just met my affrighted looks was that which the miniature had already so faithfully impressed upon my memory! In a word, the criminal Philip Ramsey was *there*—in that chamber—before the eyes of myself and his Royal Highness."

"The criminal Philip Ramsey!" murmured Eleanor, mechanically repeating the words which the Duchess had already used so frequently in the course of her narrative, and the mention of which pierced each time like a dagger into the heart and passed like a searing-iron over the brain of the wretched Lady Desborough.

"What is it that distresses you thus profoundly, my dearest friend?" inquired Georgiana. "Is it possible that Mr. Ramsey was known to you—that you experienced any interest in his behalf——"

"Proceed, proceed," exclaimed Eleanor, almost wildly. "I again implore you not to question me until your narrative is concluded. It is cruel—oh! it is cruel to force me to renew the same prayer so often."

"I would not wilfully afflict you, Eleanor," said the Duchess, in a tone of gentle remonstrance;—"and therefore your reproof is undeserved. But so long as I remain ignorant of the cause of your sorrow, I am unable to regulate the terms of my narrative in such a manner as to avoid touching that tensely drawn chord which evidently vibrates to your very heart's core."

"Pardon me, dear Georgiana, for any hasty or unkind expression on my part," said the Countess, pressing her friend's hand to her lips,—"and continue your history without reference to the emotions which it excites in my bosom. You were telling me how *he*—Philip Ramsey,"—and the beauteous Eleanor pronounced the name with a shudder,—"appeared to yourself and the Prince upon the threshold of the bath-room. What followed next?"

"His Royal Highness," resumed Georgiana, "was as profoundly and as fully struck as I was by the marvellous resemblance which the individual bore to the miniature we had previously seen: but, almost instantaneously recovering his presence of mind, the Prince demanded of the intruder who he was. Then the wretched man fell at our feet and made to us the astounding revelation that he was indeed none other than the self-same Philip Ramsey whom all the world believed to have suffered death for his crimes. In deep, low, but earnest whispers—as if he were afraid that even the very echoes would thunder forth his name and the circumstances of his resuscitation—did he explain enough to convince us that he was no impostor in a drama where imposture would have been so wondrous. No—he was not deceiving us: he was the real, identical Philip Ramsey who had been the subject of Page's fears and of our discourse that very evening. Sharply, angrily, and suspiciously did the Prince question him,—but also speaking in a low and subdued tone;—while I, bewildered and amazed, and feeling as if I were walking in a dream, had scarcely presence of mind sufficient to wrap around me the shawl which his Royal Highness threw over my half-naked form. At length I also began to question the miserable being who had fallen upon his knees before us;—but my queries were swayed by a profound terror which I could not control. There was something dreadful in finding oneself face to face with a man who had risen as it were from the grave—who had passed through the hands of the public executioner—whose body had been folded in the embrace of Death—and who was nevertheless *there*, a living, breathing, moving, sentient being still!"

"Horror! horror!" groaned Eleanor, clasping her hands together, while her countenance became more ghastly in its unearthly pallor than even when the first mention of Ramsey's name on this occasion had chased all the vital colouring from beneath the pure bistre shade of her transparent skin. "But go on—go on, Georgiana!" she exclaimed suddenly, and with a tremendous effort to subdue the agonising emotions that were raging in her breast.

"I see that I must make as speedy an end of my narrative as possible," said the Duchess of Devonshire, whose curiosity and surprise were enhanced to an almost intolerable degree. "The conversa-

tion which took place between the resuscitated criminal on the one hand and the Prince and myself on the other, was fraught with a fearful—a terrible interest. He explained to us in a few rapid but awfully thrilling words how he had been handed over to a surgeon for dissection—how the vital spark had flickered and flamed up again—how he had fled from the abode of the medical man—and how he had found an asylum in some place which he would not name. Then he informed us that a feeling of morbid curiosity had induced him to revisit the scene of his fatal amour with the self-murdered wife of Sir Richard Stamford,—and he said that, having perceived the startling effect which his appearance in the library had produced upon the Pages, he had sought refuge in the bed-chamber where Lady Stamford had surrendered up her breath. There it was his intention to remain until all was quiet in the house, when he proposed to steal forth and take his departure thence. For, well aware of the influence of superstitious fears upon the mind, he fancied that of *all* the rooms in the Manor *that* in which the deceased lady died was the very one which would be the last to be used by the inmates of the dwelling. It likewise appeared that when he suddenly heard the door open and persons enter that apartment,—meaning the Prince and myself, escorted by Mrs. Page,—he had only just time to conceal himself in the bath-room; — and when he found that the chamber was to be occupied for the night, he had resolved to come forth and throw himself upon our mercy. Such was the substance of his explanations;—and when they were completed, the Prince commanded him to leave the room at once. Then did a sudden change come over the man's countenance;—and he said, with a malicious significancy, '*From the conversation which I have ere now overheard, I learnt who this lady is,*'—pointing to me; —'*and if I experience harsh treatment at your hands, all England shall know that the Duchess of Devonshire passed the night at Stamford Manor with the Prince of Wales.*'—This announcement convinced his Royal Highness in a moment that, for *my* sake even more than his own, was it requisite to come to terms with the resuscitated criminal; and the Prince accordingly adopted a more conciliatory tone and demeanour towards him. In fine, he exacted a pledge from his Royal Highness that when a suitable opportunity should occur, and a sufficient interval should have elapsed for the impression of his crimes to have subsided in the public mind, the Prince would use his influence in the proper quarter to obtain for him a full pardon. These conditions, which Ramsey imposed, were assented to by the Prince;—and the resuscitated then took his departure. We must suppose that he escaped without notice or molestation from the house, inasmuch as on the following morning no sign nor word on the part of the Pages afforded the least ground for suspecting the contrary was the case. The Prince's private travelling-carriage came to fetch us at the hour commanded on the preceding night;—and thus ended the romantic adventure of Stamford Manor."

There was a long pause, during which the Countess of Desborough remained absorbed in the deepest reverie. She was rent by two antagonistic feelings, — the one prompting her to disburden her mind without delay of the tremendous secret that lay upon it like a weight of lead—the other urging her to conceal her amour with Ramsey as if it were a flagrant and damning crime which she had committed. But when she thought how sweet —Oh! how sweet it would be to receive sympathy from the lips of a dear and valued friend,—when she likewise reflected that the secret would be perfectly safe in the keeping of that friend,—and when she remembered how often she had felt the pining want of a confidant into whose bosom she could pour forth the flood of her woes now so painfully pent-up in her overcharged breast,—she resolved to hesitate no longer.

"My dear Georgiana," she said, taking the hand of the Duchess, in whose countenance she looked with a mingled expression of shame and affliction, wounded pride and despair,—"you will pity me—Oh! you will pity me, when you learn the sad truth which I have now to reveal. *Your* narrative was romantic and strange: *mine* is fraught with a wild and terrible interest. For it was in this house that Philip Ramsey found an asylum—and I—my God! —I became his victim? Now do you comprehend me?"

And the corrugated eye-brows, quivering lips, and convulsing bosom of the wretched Lady Desborough evinced the most ineffable anguish.

"Great heavens! is this possible?" exclaimed the Duchess, totally unprepared for so tremendous a revelation.

"It is possible!—it has happened!—it is true!" cried the Countess, in a voice of despair;—"and what is worse—Oh! ten thousand times worse—my husband is acquainted with the whole hideous circumstances!"

"Unhappy Eleanor!" exclaimed the Duchess: then, throwing her arms round her friend's neck, the generous-hearted Georgiana said all she could to comfort her.

"Ah! I was not wrong when I trusted in your friendship," sobbed the Countess, as she wept bitterly upon the bosom of the Duchess. "I knew that you would not despise me for my misfortune —that you would not loathe me on account of this crowning infamy which has become my wretched, wretched fate! No—no—you can feel for me—you can sympathise with me—you can console me! The secret of my married life was already revealed to you; and you were aware that I was pure and chaste in body, though my imagination was foul and corrupt with the cravings, and longings, and furious desires that were devouring me. Then came that man,—came at a time when all the fiercest wants of my nature had been aggravated into the famished yearnings of the strongest sensuality, by the tantalising and unaccomplished woings of the Prince. The man came, I say,—came under a fictitious name, and with a plausible tale of suffering, and friendlessness, and sorrow upon his tongue. I pitied him:—he became our guest—we were thrown much together—and you can judge, because you have seen him, whether his masculine beauty was not well—too well calculated to win my heart. In a short time—yes, even in a few days—I loved him to madness—to distraction; and I surrendered myself full willingly—Oh! *too* willingly to his arms. For a brief space did this delicious dream of paradise endure—and then it was suddenly dissipated by the rudest storm that ever broke with appalling violence upon the calm still-

ness of a summer's eve. An artist whom my husband had patronised brought a picture to exhibit—and that picture was the portrait of Philip Ramsey! Oh! what words can be found to describe the agony that seized upon me all in a moment? The collected tortures of ten thousand racks would have been a comparative elysium. How I survived that terrible day, I know not!"

"And what followed?" inquired the Duchess, profoundly interested in this strange narrative.

"Ramsey's immediate exile to America—and my husband's forgiveness generously vouchsafed towards myself," responded the Countess of Desborough.

"And do you love him still—I mean *that man*?" asked the Duchess.

"Love him!" cried Eleanor, with the sudden start and changing manner of a disdainful astonishment: then with the words hissing through her ashy lips, she added in a tone of indescribable bitterness, amounting almost to a ferocious hatred, "I abhor and detest him."

"And since he quitted England you have heard nothing of him?—he has not sought to communicate with you?" said the Duchess, inquiringly.

"God forbid?" ejaculated Eleanor. "I hope he is dead—and yet I am not naturally ungenerous nor cruelly inclined."

"You will pardon me for asking one more question," said Georgiana, with some little degree of hesitation. "Have you not endeavoured to console yourself with another lover?"

"No—on my soul *no!*" exclaimed the Countess, the blood now rushing back to her cheeks. "There was a time," she continued more calmly and slowly, "when I experienced towards my husband sentiments that bordered even upon aversion: but if he were guilty of a wrong towards me in making me his wife, the outrage which my amour constituted towards himself was ten thousand times more flagrant. Our positions therefore changed; and instead of it being for *me* to pardon, 'twas for me to implore *his* forgiveness. And that forgiveness he gave even before it was sought: spontaneously it flowed from his really generous and lofty soul. Think you, then, Georgiana, that I am ungrateful for such conduct as this?—think you that I would prove an ingrate for so much noble-mindedness evinced towards myself? No—Oh! no—it were impossible! I have learnt to restrain my desires—to put a curb upon the longings of an ardent temperament—and to do my duty as a wife. Therefore was it that I felt annoyed and vexed when your thoughtlessness might have so seriously compromised me with Lord Florimel."

"But was it not strange that the Earl should have become the purchaser of Stamford Manor?" inquired the Duchess,—"knowing, as he must have done, that it was a scene so peculiarly associated with the misdeeds of Philip Ramsey?"

"He was already in treaty for the property before the tremendous exposure took place," answered the Countess: "and he had even paid a deposit as an earnest of the bargain. After the fatal discovery, he consulted me upon the subject, and offered to forego the transaction. But I was anxious to give him a proof of that strength of mind which should regulate and influence my future actions; and I therefore not only urged him to complete the business, but so soon as it was concluded I was the first to propose that we should visit our new property."

In this manner did the Duchess of Devonshire and the Countess of Desborough continue to discourse upon the various subjects that engrossed their interest;—and after having remained for nearly three hours with her friend, the brilliant Georgiana took her leave.

Not ten minutes had elapsed from the moment that her Grace's carriage drove away from the door, when a servant entered the apartment, bearing a letter. Having presented it to the Countess, the footman retired, and Eleanor, whom the incident had aroused from a reverie of deep and painful thought, glanced at the superscription.

Were it possible for an arrow suddenly to traverse the brain, inflicting only a poignant torture without killing its victim upon the spot, we might readily conceive its effect to be that which the first glimpse of the handwriting of this letter's address produced upon Lady Desborough. She started violently—she was thrilled with the spasm of a mortal terror that shot through her entire frame from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet.

Then, as if suspense were worse than even the realization of the appalling suspicion that had flashed up into vivid vitality in her mind, she tore the letter frantically open. But one glance at its contents was sufficient: her fingers relaxed their hold upon the paper—her brain was seized with a sudden reeling—her sight became dizzy—and, covering her face with her hands, she groaned murmuringly, "My God! my God! what will become of me?"

CHAPTER CLXXXIX.

THE REUNITED FRIENDS.

We must now introduce our readers to the abode of Lady Lade in King Street, St. James's.

It was in the evening of the same day on which the incidents just related took place, and the Amazon was seated in her dining-room, with her old friend and paramour Tim Meagles. The dessert and wine were upon the table: but they remained almost entirely untouched—for the couple, thus reunited, were fully absorbed in the discussion of the many topics which interested them.

The beautiful huntress was now apparelled in widow's weeds. Her magnificent hair no longer fell in a thousand ringlets over her shoulders: it was arranged in the simple style suitable to her mourning garb, and was nearly altogether concealed by the snowy cap which she was compelled to wear. The sable dress set off her fine shape to a somewhat less advantage than the male attire which was wont to develop her well-formed limbs in a manner so comparatively undisguised and exciting: but still the admirer of the sex who had never seen her in her Amazonian garb, would not have been very willing to admit that she could possibly have improved by any change of raiment that appearance which she presented in her costume of widowhood. For the fashion of the day allowed the body of the dress to be so low and open in front that it revealed the luxuriant richness of that bust which the tight-fitting frock-coat had con-

THE MARCHIONESS OF BELLENDEN.

cealed altogether; and those who were wont to admire the superb slope of her shoulders, could now contemplate their dazzling whiteness into the bargain.

Although the impressions were still fresh and vivid which had been made upon her by Sir John Lade's sudden death, and which had fastened upon her mind when the tidings of that event were conveyed to her in the sponging-house,—and although her present discourse with Tim Meagles was of a grave and serious nature,—yet was there a certain roguish archness in the expression of her features which contrasted singularly enough with the mourning cap that imprisoned her handsome countenance. This charming wickedness of look had become so habitual to her that she could not possibly divest herself of it, even if she had tried: it flashed from her magnificent dark eyes—glowed upon her carnation cheeks—and shone in the half-smile that no seriousness of thought or circumstance could banish completely from her full red lips.

Her friend and companion Tim Meagles was but little altered in personal appearance; his countenance was slightly weather-beaten—and that was the only visible effect his voyage had produced upon him. He was dressed in precisely the same dashing style which has already been made so familiar to our readers,—the sporting coat, the white corduroys, the lapping waistcoat, and the top-boots. His auburn whiskers were as well curled as ever, and perhaps a trifle larger; and his bright red hair was parted with that studied negligence which threw its wavy masses up in such a manner as to give an advantageous elongation to the appearance of the head. His linen was scrupulously clean: his neckerchief was tied with characteristic fastidiousness;—and across his hat upon the sideboard lay the almost inseparable riding-whip.

But the countenance of Tim Meagles wore a

gravity of expression that might almost be termed ominous. Nor was this to be wondered at: for on arriving in London on the previous evening, he had received from Letitia Lade a full account of all that had transpired during his absence. She had told him how she had discovered that the Prince was the author of his expatriation, and how his lodgings had been ransacked and the important documents taken away: she freely explained to him how she had visited his Royal Highness and become the partner of his bed in order to regain possession of the papers;—and she likewise made him acquainted with the manner in which the heir-apparent had once more recovered those documents, and how he had warned and menaced herself with regard to the consequences of any future molestation which she might offer him.

Already smarting under the cruel and ingrate treatment which he had received from the Prince, and arriving in London with a burning desire for revenge, Meagles was not likely to feel his spirits raised by the details of Lady Lade's narrative. He had built his plans upon the hope of finding the papers secure and safe in the possession of the Amazon, whom he knew to be well aware of the place where he was wont to keep them at his lodgings: but this hope was destroyed by the recital which, on his return to London, he heard from her lips.

This narrative, as we have above stated, was given on the evening previous to that on which we now introduce our readers to Lady Letitia's abode. Meagles had returned to his lodgings in Jermyn Street, where Mrs. Piggleberry went into hysterics of joy at beholding him again. Her first floor had never been let since he was forced to leave England; and he therefore resumed possession of the apartments. His property was all safe in Mrs. Piggleberry's care: the Amazon had taken charge of his horses during his absence;—and the volatile Wasp, who was likewise rejoiced to welcome his master safe back again, returned to his service. Lady Lade's purse was open to him;—and thus in many respects we find our friend Tim restored to the same position which he occupied when the Prince's treachery sent him all on a sudden out of the country.

During the morning after the night of his arrival in London, he had called at the lodgings which Melmoth and his family occupied in Westminster when he first knew them: but the faint hope that he had entertained of hearing some tidings in that quarter relative to the fate of the working-man, his wife, and children, was disappointed. He was therefore ignorant whether Melmoth had succeeded in effecting his escape on that memorable night when he committed himself to the mercy of the Thames off Woolwich, or whether he had perished in the endeavour to avoid expatriation. He had likewise called at Mrs. Brace's establishment in Pall Mall to make inquiries concerning Rose Foster, whose image had ever remained uppermost in his mind: but his queries experienced naught save abrupt and cold negatives. Then, in the afternoon, he had repaired to the abode of Lady Lade, with whom he had promised to dine;—and we therefore now behold the reunited couple sitting together over the almost untasted dessert, and discussing the various topics arising from past occurrences, especially those which the Amazon's history of the preceding evening had developed.

"And thus," observed Meagles, after a long pause, "every one of our grand hopes has been knocked down and annihilated."

"It would seem so, Tim," replied the widow: then, smiling outright for the first time that evening, she said archly, "Fate has determined that you are not to be a Duke, and that I am therefore never to be a Duchess."

"And all through the accursed treachery, ingratitude, and perfidy of that scoundrel Prince," added Meagles, bitterly.

"Is your rancour so absorbing that you could not even give me some other hope, Tim," said Lady Lade, the sunny smile still lingering upon her lips,—"even though you cannot make me a Duchess?"

"My dear Letitia, you are an excellent friend to me," answered Meagles; "and I ought to do anything and everything I can to please you. But you will admit that neither of us can be in a humour to discuss future plans, unless it be the mode of carrying out that vengeance which we are both determined to wreak upon the Prince."

"And yet you must give me one assurance, Tim," said the widow, looking absolutely enchanting as she spoke. "I intend to wear this garb," she added, glancing down at her mourning dress, "precisely one year, as a mark of respect to the memory of a man who was too good to such a worthless, ungrateful wife as I proved towards him. But at the expiration of that time——"

"You and I will be made one," responded Meagles, touched by the devotion of this woman who was rich and independent, but who with all her faults remained faithful to her affection for him, altered though his prospects were.

"That assurance is all that I require, Tim," she observed: "and in the meantime I intend that we shall be upon the best possible behaviour with regard to each other—excellent friends, and nothing more. Now, you understand what I mean," she added, with an arch smile and a deepening of the carnation upon her cheeks. "I am a singular, wayward, eccentric creature; and I have resolved to remain more faithful to Sir John's memory for a year after his death, than ever I was during any one single week of his life-time. That is my phantasy: or rather, it is my way of showing as much gratitude as I can for all the kindnesses he heaped upon me. Perhaps there is also a slight tinge of remorse in the matter——But never mind!" she exclaimed, suddenly interrupting herself, while a tear glistened in her eye, like a rain-drop upon a sloe in the sun-shine. "You comprehend my meaning—and it shall be an agreement between us, Tim—shall it not?"

"To be sure, my beauty—since you wish it," returned Meagles, patting the cheek down which that pearly tear was now slowly tracing its way like another rain-drop over a peach of the deepest vermeil dye.

"Now, is this the way you commence the performance of your part of the agreement?" she exclaimed, laughing with something like that joyousness of tone which used to sound like a blythe harmony in Meagles' ears. "But I am really serious, Tim," she observed, her manner suddenly becoming grave, and even determined: "and

therefore nothing more than a kiss at meeting and another at parting until the expiration of the year. And then——"

"And then—what?" asked Meagles, recovering somewhat of his own former gaiety, as he looked with a sly significance into the depths of the widow's splendid black eyes.

"And then—anything you choose," she answered, drawing back her chair to avoid another patting of the cheek which her companion seemed inclined to bestow upon her.

"Well, my beauty," he said, laughing, "you shall rule me in all things: for, as I just now observed, you have been a good and kind friend to me—and absence has not made you forget me."

And as Meagles gave utterance to these words, he inwardly vowed to renounce all idea of seeking any more after Rose Foster: for he could not feel otherwise than touched by the conduct of Lady Lade towards him. Nevertheless, as he came to that resolve, he could not help heaving a sigh at the sacrifice he was thus making to a sense of gratitude: for he had never experienced towards the Amazon any other feeling than that of friendship mingled with the attachment which belongs to a sensual fruition.

"You sigh, Tim," she observed. "Have you anything upon your mind with which I am unacquainted?"

"Nothing, I can assure you," he exclaimed, suddenly forcing himself to seem cheerful. "But all these matters with which you *are* acquainted, are enough to drive a fellow wild with vexation. To think that some few months ago—weeks I may say—the Prince was so completely in our power;—and now he is thoroughly out of our clutches. Because all the secrets which we know of, are useless as weapons to wield against him, without the documentary evidence to support the verbal assertion of those facts."

"What course, then, do you propose to adopt?" inquired the Amazon: "for revenged upon him we *must* and *will* be, even if we gain no really solid and substantial advantage. What do you think of making use of the Marquis of Saint Croix, who, as I told you last night, cannot obtain a single shilling from the Prince, and who has been dunning him, at my instigation, for some weeks past?"

"But how can we make any use of him beyond what you have already done in that respect?" asked Meagles.

"Persuade him to publish a pamphlet containing a full statement of his case," replied the widow.

"Well, we may do *that*," said her companion: "but I want a far more substantial revenge—a revenge which shall proceed *directly*, and not *indirectly* from ourselves, and which the Prince nevertheless could not adopt as a pretext for punishing us."

"Watch all his movements, Tim," suggested Lady Lade; "and depend upon it, you will find him out in some prank the circumstances of which we may turn to our own purposes. Who knows but that we might once more get him into our power?"

"True! The advice is excellent," observed Meagles. "From what you told me last night and from the inquiries which I was enabled to make this morning, it is pretty clear that he and his wife, the Princess, are already on queer terms with each other. Such at least is the current rumour, founded on little incidents that have oozed out even from the innermost privacy of Carlton House;—and the report is pretty well confirmed by what a friend of mine who is connected with the Opera, and whom I accidently met this morning, confidentially whispered in my ear."

"To what effect was his communication?" inquired the widow.

"That the Prince had three of the new dancing-girls at Carlton House last night," returned Meagles; "and one of them remained with him until the morning. It is therefore pretty evident that he is still pursuing the old game."

"And hence the greater encouragement for you to adopt the course which I have suggested, and keep a watch upon his movements and proceedings so far as you can," observed Lady Lade. "You are so well acquainted with his habits and pursuits—the faces of all the frequenters of Carlton House are so familiar to you—and you are so quick at drawing the most important deductions from the slightest incidents, that you could scarcely fail to discover, sooner or later, something that may be turned to our advantage. What do you really think of my suggestion?"

"The longer I reflect upon it, the better I am pleased with it," rejoined Meagles. "Come, we will give up moping and desponding, Letitia," he exclaimed, a sudden brightness overspreading his countenance; "and we will drink success to our schemes. Here, my beauty—pledge me in a bumper."

And Meagles, having filled two glasses with claret, handed one to his fair companion.

"Well, I cannot refuse to pledge you in that toast, Tim," she observed, with a smile;—and the next moment her empty glass was set down upon the table.

"Now perhaps you will take a weed, my harum-scarum?" said Meagles, presenting his cigar-case.

"No—not until my year's mourning shall have expired, Tim," answered the widow. "You must tempt me into nothing wrong, you know," she added, with a laugh which revealed the two rows of large but splendid teeth.

"And in order to avoid leading you into temptation, my beauty," said Meagles, rising from his chair, "I will take a stroll while I smoke my cigar. It is now eight o'clock," he observed, after consulting his watch;—"and I will this very night commence operations with a ramble about the vicinage of Carlton House for an hour or so."

"You will return to supper, Tim?" said the widow, as he took up his hat to depart.

"Assuredly, my charmer," responded Meagles;—"and I leave my whip as the security for my return."

Then, stepping close up to the Amazon, he threw his arms round her neck and imprinted a kiss upon her moist red mouth.

"Hey-dey! what does this mean?" she cried, affecting an angry look, as she arranged the cap which the abruptness of the proceeding had somewhat disturbed.

"Did you not promise a kiss at meeting and another at parting on every occasion?" demanded Meagles, laughing with all the joyousness of former times.

"Oh! that is the interpretation you put upon my

words—eh, Master Tim?" exclaimed the lady, her own hilarious tones now echoing the merriment of her friend. "Well, I suppose I must suffer you to have your own way in *that* respect, at all events. And now take yourself off without farther delay—so that you may return all the earlier to enjoy your supper——"

"And likewise the kiss at meeting again," added Meagles, still laughing as he quitted the room.

Then, having lighted his cigar in the hall, he sallied forth upon his evening ramble.

CHAPTER CXC.

A SCENE IN A DARK AVENUE.

TAKING the nearest cut to St. James's Park, and enjoying his havannah with a more than ordinary zest,—for his spirits had risen almost to their former tone, now that he had adopted some settled proceeding with regard to the Prince,—Tim Meagles entered the long avenue shaded by trees and generally known as the Mall. He walked up and down three or four times in front of Carlton House, and looked wistfully up at the windows blazing with light, as if he would have given some of the best years of his existence to be enabled to catch a glimpse of what was passing within that palatial residence.

Suddenly a man, of tall stature, enveloped in a cloak and with his hat drawn over his countenance, hurried past;—and it instantaneously struck Meagles that the figure, just as it now appeared in its disguise, was not unknown to him. The light of a lamp in front of Carlton House had enabled him to observe how carefully the individual was wrapped up in that capacious mantle, and how studiously the face was concealed by the hat: a moment afterwards and the man had disappeared from his view, plunging as it were into the obscurity of the adjacent avenue. So hurriedly had the individual passed that he had not appeared to notice Meagles at all.

For a few moments Tim stopped short—took the cigar from his mouth—and murmured to himself, "Where on earth have I seen that figure before?" Then, with the vividness of an inspiration, did it flash to his memory that he had beheld the individual on board the *Diana* frigate.

"Yes—it is the same—Mr. Gustavus Wakefield, the merchant," he said to himself, as the remembrance struck him;—"the individual who came on board from the pirate-ship, along with Joe Warren and Stephen Price, and who is to be a witness against those fellows! Well, I never once caught a glimpse of his countenance all the time he was on board the *Diana*. There is something strange and mysterious about him;—else wherefore should he have remained in such strict seclusion in his cabin at sea? and why, on a warm evening like this, should he go about enveloped in that huge cloak? It is singular—very singular!"

And having thus mused upon the matter, Tim Meagles replaced the cigar between his lips and mechanically struck into the avenue in the same direction which Philip Ramsey—for he indeed it was—had just taken.

Sauntering leisurely along—smoking his cigar—and allowing his thoughts to wander from the incident that had just occurred to other subjects, Meagles had soon ceased to devote any particular attention to the appearance of the disguised one;—and he was pondering upon the generous character of the profligate Amazon and the winning beauty of the amiable Rose Foster, when the rapid advance of footsteps struck upon his ear. All that line of pathway which skirted the railings of the enclosure, was enveloped in total darkness—for the evening, though warm, was cloudy and starless, and the few thinly scattered oil-lamps facing the house on the other side of the Mall reached not with their inefficient beams even half across the several avenues of trees.

On hearing the footsteps approach, their rapid tread instantaneously brought back the incident of the cloaked figure to the mind of Meagles;—and concealing in his hand the lighted end of the cigar, he sat down upon a bench placed against the trunk of a tree, his person being thereby absorbed as it were in the deepest of the deep shades which obscured the avenue. For one of those vague and unaccountable impulses of curiosity which amount almost to a presentiment, had now seized upon him; and his attention being re-awakened in respect to the individual whom he only knew by the name of Gustavus Wakefield, he resolved to take note of his proceedings.

Scarcely had he stationed himself under the tree, when a form, darker than the darkness, passed rapidly by;—and the shape of the figure was sufficiently discernible to enable Meagles to identify it with the one he had previously seen. In less than a minute the rapid footsteps suddenly ceased; and the sounds of voices, low and murmuring, reached the ears of Meagles.

"The mysterious Mr. Wakefield has an appointment, doubtless," thought Tim within himself; "and he has just encountered the person whom he came here to meet. But, Ah! they are approaching this way!"

Such was indeed the case, as the footsteps now announced: but the voices had altogether ceased. Meagles slipped behind the tree in order to keep watch with the greater certainty of being unobserved;—and in a few moments the cloaked one, accompanied by the person who had just joined him, came and seated themselves upon the very bench which Meagles had the instant before abandoned.

They now began to speak again—and Tim discovered that the pseudo Mr. Gustavus Wakefield's companion was a female.

"You received my note—and you have kept the appointment which I gave you," said Ramsey, in a low whispering tone, but which was perfectly audible to the listener stationed behind the tree.

"Yes—I received your note—and I have come to the appointment," responded the Countess of Desborough—for she it was: and the voice in which she spoke was marked with the unnatural calmness that evinced a terrible inward struggle to subdue an outburst of painful—perhaps agonising emotions. "But wherefore have you sought to disturb my peace—*you*, for whom I have already suffered so much?"

"Then am I to understand that everything is at an end between us," demanded Ramsey,—"and that you now hate as deeply as you once loved me?"

"Suffice it for you to know that I repent bitterly, bitterly of the past," returned Eleanor, in a profound tone,—"and that if you have any regard for my happiness you will bring this interview to as speedy a termination as possible."

"Your words, haughty and cruel lady, afford the fullest and completest explanation which it is possible for you to give with regard to the present state of your feelings towards me. How changed, then," continued Ramsey, in a tone which rather partook of spiteful upbraiding than of gentle remonstrance,—"how changed, then, has become the once loving and yielding Countess of Desborough——"

"Hush! breathe not my name, I implore you!" interrupted the lady, in a voice full of terror and anguish. "We may be overheard—listeners may approach stealthily through the deep obscurity of this avenue——"

"There is no danger of that," said Ramsey. "Let us continue to speak in a low tone and with as little excitement as possible; and the sounds of any approaching footsteps will convey their own warning to our ears. I was observing, then, that the once adoring and tender lady who was ready to abandon home, husband, rank, station, and everything, for the man to whom she had pledged her love, is now so changed that she even grudges him an interview of a few minutes,—she who was wont to think that even hours passed away too rapidly when spent with me!"

"Alas! you know it is not my fault," said the Countess, in a trembling tone, "if fearful circumstances occurred to cast a blight upon that love which I do not deny having devoted to you."

"And had you never learnt that the false Gustavus Wakefield was the resuscitated criminal Philip Ramsey," observed the man, with a horrible bitterness in his accents, whisperingly low though they were, "you would have continued to love on to the end?"

"Your words fill me with a dread which is almost overwhelming," said the Countess, her voice broken by half-strangling gasps and convulsions of terror. "My God! if we were overheard? What would become of *you*?—what would the world think of *me*?"

"I care but little what may happen to myself," returned Ramsey, affecting a deep despondency of tone,—"now that you have annihilated all the fond hopes which I had ventured to build up during my absence."

"Hopes!" ejaculated the Countess, in accents full of alarm. "What hopes could you have conceived?—and wherefore have you returned to England? Do you not dread my husband's wrath, should he discover that you have thus acted in contravention of his commands?"

"Your husband will not dare to give publicity to a narrative that must expose his wife's shame while inflicting ruin upon me," answered Ramsey; "and I was an idiot at the time to suffer my fears so far to prevail over my reason and common sense, as to drive me into that banishment which the Earl of Desborough enjoined as the sole condition of his forbearance."

"But should my husband happen to encounter you," said the lady, "he might adopt in a sudden paroxysm of rage that extreme course which in his calmer moments he would doubtless deplore."

"I thank you for your advice," observed Ramsey, in a cold tone: "but you will permit me to be the best judge of my own actions. Nevertheless," he immediately added, with the sudden assumption of a kinder tone, "I do not wish to speak harshly to you. Just now you appeared astonished and incredulous that I should have cherished any hope with regard to you: but I had a firmer faith and a stronger reliance in woman's love than the result has justified. I flattered myself that if your heart were really mine, no possible circumstances could have altered the state of your affections—no human influence could have converted that love into hatred. I thought that you would have become my guardian genius and my good angel—pitying me for the past, and aiding me in my endeavour to make all possible atonement by my conduct in future. I had buoyed myself up with the idea that your love would rise superior to all earthly influences, no matter how terrible they might have proved. But I have been mistaken;—and the very tone in which you addressed me when we met ere now, and the recoil which you made from my outstretched arms, convinced me in a moment that I had nothing to expect or anticipate of all the bright visions which imagination had conjured up while away."

"You speak as if *you* at least still entertained generous feelings towards me," murmured the Countess. "Be truly generous, then—and let this interview cease at once. For I will not hesitate to declare that it is painful—very painful to me! Besides, the forgiveness of a noble-hearted husband imposes upon me certain duties which I would not violate."

"I perceive by your tone that I have indeed become an object of dread aversion to the woman who once loved me so enthusiastically, and whom I still love so devotedly," said Ramsey, throwing into his accents a tremulous pathos so well simulated that the Countess could not for a single moment suspect its sincerity. "You ask me to be generous—and I will prove so to the extent of my power. Grant me, then, one favour—one last boon—and I will afterwards bid you farewell for ever!"

"And that boon—that favour?" said the Countess, catching eagerly at the hope of disembarrassing herself eternally of a man for whom she did indeed entertain a horrible aversion and an intense loathing, although her fears induced her to conceal those sentiments as much as she was able.

"The boon which I crave," returned Ramsey, "is that you will afford me the opportunity of gazing once more—and only for a few brief minutes—upon that wondrous beauty which has become so impressed upon my mind as to form as it were a portion of my very memory itself. Let me see your countenance in all the splendour of its loveliness—let me gaze upon your form, apparelled in the garb best calculated to display the glory of its perfection."

"You are mad!—you are raving!" murmured the Countess, the hope which had so recently sprung up in her mind, now changing to a poignant alarm. "How can I grant you such an opportunity as you demand? To be enabled to come forth alone this evening, enveloped in a plain cloak and with this simple straw bonnet upon my head, I have been compelled to invent excuses the re-

Manor recorded that this suite of apartments had been inhabited by Hannah Lightfoot, the Quakeress, during her sojourn there about thirty-seven years previously to the time of which we are writing.

It was into these rooms that Lady Desborough now made her way;—and in the drawer of a piece of furniture in the parlour did she conceal the pistol and dagger. She then descended the staircase—passed out into the garden by the door at the bottom—and took the key with her. This she placed in the cup which a statue of the God of Wine, standing on a pedestal near the garden-gate, held in its hand. Lastly she took away the key of the garden-gate itself, so that it might not be locked as usual after dusk.

These arrangements having been accomplished, the Countess of Desborough walked in the garden and the shrubbery, to court the solitude which was now most congenial to her soul. She thought on many, many things—but principally the event of the approaching evening;—and as her mind was active in its painful meditations, the time passed by more rapidly than it usually does in hours of anxiety, nervousness, and sorrow.

At five o'clock she re-entered the mansion, and proceeded to her own room to dress for dinner. The apparel she chose was elegant and tasteful: it was white watered silk beautifully trimmed with lace looped up with roses. Although her complexion was olive, yet was it so transparent and delicate in its tinge of bistre, that it was by no means unsuited for that white dress;—and as the excitement of her mind had deepened upon her cheeks the rich carnation hue that glowed through the diaphanous skin, the general effect was captivating in the extreme.

Her hair, soft as silk and of velvet blackness, hung in massive tresses upon her polished shoulders;—and the low corsage of the dress revealed sufficient of the well-proportioned bust to show that it retained all the roundness and freshness of youth. For be it remembered that Lady Desborough was only in her twenty-ninth year; and at that age a woman of well-preserved charms is in all the glory of her beauty.

A wreath of white roses set off the sable darkness and raven glossiness of her hair; and the ornaments that clasped the arms, which were naked to the shoulders, assisted to display their admirable symmetry by outlining their modelled roundness. Altogether the Countess of Desborough appeared on the present occasion to an advantage which rendered her a woman for whom the misanthrope would consent to live, and for whom the chivalrous champion would hesitate not to die.

When the dinner was served up at six o'clock, the Earl was somewhat surprised to behold the more than usual care which his beauteous wife had evidently bestowed upon her toilette, considering that they were alone together. For although Eleanor invariably dressed with a richness becoming her position and an elegance in accord with her refined taste, yet she was not accustomed to appear in the vesture suited to a grand party when there was no company to receive at all. But she hastened to observe "that she thought it not unlikely their friends the Duke and Duchess of Devonshire would visit the Manor in the evening, as she believed they had intended to leave London that morning in order to pass a few days at their villa in the neighbourhood."

This excuse—and an invented one it really was—appeared quite natural to the Earl, who was moreover too proud of his splendid Countess to think of being dissatisfied at any unusual carefulness of toilette which had the effect of enhancing the glory of her charms.

The dinner passed—the dessert was placed upon the table—and Eleanor partook of a glass or two of wine, which increased the animation that mental excitement had imparted to her cheeks. She remained conversing with the Earl until about half-past eight;—and then she retired to her own chamber, while he withdrew to the library.

When alone in her bed-room, the Countess looked in the mirror and saw that the carnation had deepened upon her cheeks and that the fire of her eyes was more than ordinarily lustrous. Indeed, she could not fail to observe that she was brilliantly beautiful on this occasion;—and she now began to regret that she had taken so much pains to enhance the natural effect of her loveliness by the auxiliaries of the toilette. Let not the reader, however, imagine that it was art which had shed the hue of the carnation upon her cheek: no—'twas the natural bloom of vigorous health which the wine had deepened into a ruddier glow.

But we said that she regretted the pains she had taken to set off the brilliancy of her charms to the utmost advantage. Yes—she regretted it now that the dreaded moment was approaching: for might not Philip Ramsey be tempted by her appearance to pass the bounds of that reverential discretion and respectful forbearance which he had promised to observe? Ah! if he dared, had she not provided weapons wherewith to defend herself?—and was she not resolved to use them in a case of emergency, at all risks and in defiance of all consequences? Aye—and had she not nerved herself by means of the stimulating influence of wine, to play the part of a heroine, if need should be?

As these reflections traversed her mind, the momentary regret was dissipated:—and in its place arose a feeling of satisfaction to think that she had fulfilled *her* portion of the compact to the very letter, and was therefore fully justified in demanding a similar fidelity to the agreement on *his* part. She had done as he had desired; she had arrayed herself in her most becoming apparel—and there would consequently be no pretext for another meeting—no excuse on his part for demanding another interview.

Thus do we find this noble lady faithful to the terms which had been imposed upon her, and which she had accepted as the condition of Ramsey's bidding her farewell for ever. We shall presently see how far she was justified in placing any reliance upon the solemnly-pledged oath of that man whom she had once loved with all the ardour of a worship and all the frenzy of an infatuation.

She looked at her watch—it wanted five minutes to nine. Satisfying herself that the note which she had written in the afternoon was safe in her bosom, the Countess of Desborough summoned all her courage to her aid, and proceeded along the passage to the parlour where she had appointed to meet Ramsey. She carried in her hands the two wax-candles which belonged to her own bed-chamber; and upon entering the room, she carefully closed the shutters and drew the curtains, that the light should not be observed from without. Then she looked to ascertain that the loaded pistol and the

pointed dagger were safe where she had deposited them;—and scarcely had she satisfied herself on this head, when she heard footsteps stealthily ascending the stairs.

Her breath was suspended as she listened—her bosom remained upheaved for a few moments—and the colour came and went upon her cheeks in variations as rapid as the play of the moonlight upon the rippling surface of a lake. The dreaded instant was at hand—and she experienced a sensation like a warning that this was a crisis in her destiny. Another moment—and the door opened!

Then the breath came again—and the bosom fell—yes, and the heart too fell within. A dimness overspread her vision, and she staggered a few steps backward, as the ominous figure, muffled in the capacious cloak and with a large hat slouched over the countenance which it completely shaded, crossed the threshold and stood in her presence. But when that figure, like some sinister being of another world, turned and closed the door behind,—when, in fact, the belief struck to the soul of the Countess that she was now *alone* with the resuscitated criminal,—the thought sent through her entire frame such a thrill of horror that she was instantaneously recalled, or rather startled to a full sense of her unenviable position.

But the visitor stood there—nor offered to remove his hat;—and this circumstance struck the Countess as singular. She threw upon him an eagle glance—a glance which pierced like a lightning-flash through the shade in which the slouching brims and the high cloak-collar obscured his features;—and then a scream burst from her lips as she saw that her visitor was *not* Philip Ramsey.

At the same moment the hat was flung off—the cloak thrown aside:—and the Prince of Wales stood in the presence of the Countess of Desborough.

"I am betrayed! I am betrayed!" she murmured

all the colour flying from her cheeks, and her limbs tottering back once more. "But what means this imposture—this cheat?" she exclaimed, suddenly nerved with the courage of desperation: and her eyes flashed fire and her countenance grew flushed again.

"Banish all excitement, beautiful lady," said the Prince, in a tone of joyous confidence: "for we may perhaps have some few matters to discuss—and I should recommend you to enter upon the argument with coolness and composure."

While the Prince was yet speaking, the terrible thought flashed to the brain of the Countess that inasmuch as he had come thither as Ramsey's substitute, he was doubtless aware of everything which had taken place between herself and the resuscitated criminal;—and recoiling from the hideous idea that her shame and infamy were thus known to a man who was so thoroughly heartless and so remorselessly cruel, she sank down as if annihilated upon the sofa that happened to be near.

Again did the rich carnation fly from her cheeks: and with a look of despair fixed upon his Royal Highness, she appeared to regard him as the arbiter of her destinies.

"Listen to me, Lady Desborough," said the Prince, crossing his arms over his breast as he stood before her drawn up to his full height: "you are at length in my power—and you feel it! Circumstances have ordained that my vengeance and my passion shall be consummated at the same time. I have longed to humble you—and with a single word can I do it: I have longed to possess you—and in a few minutes you will surrender yourself to my arms!"

"Never—never!" exclaimed the Countess, actuated by a sudden frenzy: and she bounded towards the place where she had concealed the murderous weapons.

But the Prince, imagining that she was about to seek the door in order to effect her escape, caught her round the waist;—and, as he thus drew her somewhat suddenly and violently back, she pulled out the drawer the handle of which she had just grasped.

The pistol and the dagger were thus revealed to the eyes of the Prince, who absolutely hurled the Countess from him while he snatched up the weapons. The unhappy lady was thrown forcibly upon the sofa; and finding herself baffled, defeated, overwhelmed at every point, she covered her face with her hands and burst into a flood of tears. At the same moment the Prince snapped the dagger in twain and dashed the contents of a water-decanter over the priming of the pistol.

"Now you are utterly and irredeemably in my power," he said, with a tone and look of savage triumph. "I said ere now that I could humble you with a word—and that word shall be spoken without hesitation and without remorse. Yes, proud and haughty lady—I salute thee as the paramour of the man who was hanged——"

A shriek that was half stifled by a convulsive sob, burst from the lips of the wretched Eleanor as she clasped her hands together, while the whole elastic symmetry of her elegant form writhed with the spasmodic thrill of horror that shot through it.

"Now, you have forced me thus to proclaim the humiliating fact," continued the Prince,—"*you*, who would have murdered me if I had left you the chance," he cried, flinging a rapid look upon the broken poniard and the useless pistol. "But you need not affect the prude towards me, after having revelled in the embraces of a man whose neck bears the mark of the accursed halter! Oh! you may groan in spirit, proud lady: but it delights me thus to humble thee—yes, *thee* who hast proved so cruel and so disdainful towards myself! But all thy proceedings are well known to me, Lady Desborough—and I have farther evidence, if you wish it to be proclaimed, to show that your virtue is not the most stubborn in the world. For the resuscitated criminal must have been speedily forgotten by the frail fair one who some few weeks after that amour was seen gallanting with the pretty and baby-faced Lord Florimel disguised in a female garb!"

"On my honour—on my oath, I am innocent in that respect!" cried the Countess, springing to her feet and contemplating the heir-apparent with mingled terror and anger. "Oh! surely, surely the *one* fault of my life is a sufficient reproach—yes, and a stigma too—without this second accusation that is so utterly unfounded!"

"What matters it, lady, on how many lovers you have bestowed your favours," demanded the Prince, ironically, "when a felon can boast of having been the object of thy virgin affections? For he has told me all—yes, everything—thy husband's tremendous secret——"

"The miscreant Ramsey!" muttered Eleanor between her set teeth, while an expression of diabolical hatred swept like a thunder-cloud over her grandly beautiful countenance: then, in a rapid and fearfully excited tone, she said aloud, "Prince of Wales, listen to me for one moment—and let us thoroughly understand our relative positions! You are acquainted with all the secrets of my life—and you can blast my reputation and my happiness with a single word. I am in your power—I know it—I feel it. But are you the less in mine?—and can I breathe no word that will also blast *your* reputation and *your* happiness? Remember the scene at Carlton House—on the memorable night of the ball! Remember, I say, how Mrs. Fitzherbert suddenly appeared in the room to which I had been inveigled, and how she proclaimed herself your wife! But there is now *another* Princess of Wales at Carlton House;—and the secret that his Royal Highness the heir-apparent to the British throne is a perjured bigamist can be as easily thundered forth to the public, as wretched, wretched narrative of my infamy and disgrace! Pause, then—reflect—and beware how you proclaim a war to the death against me—a war that shall only terminate in the ruin of us both!"

The Prince had listened attentively—with the cold sardonism of a man who cares not for the menaces which are levelled against him;—and the Countess of Desborough beheld with an increasing terror the total failure of the course which she was adopting. She read upon his countenance the contempt that he experienced for her words: she saw in his looks the fiendish satisfaction of a certain triumph.

"But the proofs of my marriage with Mrs. Fitzherbert?" he exclaimed: "those proofs, I say—where are they? Destroyed—annihilated! The papers are burnt—and no one will credit the mad assertions of interested or revengeful women!

You perceive, therefore, Eleanor, that I am not in your power——"

"One word more, then!" ejaculated the Countess, well nigh driven to the frenzy of despair: "consummate the crowning infamy with regard to me—force me to surrender to your arms—and I swear by heaven that I will yet wreak a deadly vengeance upon you and yours! Prince of Wales," added the unhappy lady, the words hissing between her ashy lips, "your sister the Princess Sophia has become a mother—you know it——and, as there is a God above us, I will reveal that tremendous secret if you dare to persist in your cowardly conduct towards me!"

The heir-apparent was staggered: for this blow came as cruelly as it was unexpected. The Countess perceived the sudden effect which the menace had produced—and her features became animated with a joyous triumph. It seemed as if all the fire of her beauty, which a moment before had paled and grown dim, blazed up resplendently in an instant;—and his Royal Highness, on recovering from the shock that he had just experienced, was seized with another and far different feeling. He beheld before him a woman who appeared suddenly to have changed and dilated into the glory of a goddess;—and all at once was he maddened by the effect of that flushing of her splendid countenance, that lighting up of her magnificent dark eyes, and that heaving of her half-naked bosom,—these being the evidences of the joyous triumph which had suddenly thrilled with a warm glow throughout her entire being.

"Eleanor, Eleanor," he said, his voice trembling with ardent passion, "let us be friends—let us not continue enemies! I love you—yes—I love you—and I implore your pardon for the torture which I have inflicted upon your feelings. I was wrong—I was a coward—I performed an unmanly part: but you will forgive me—you will forgive me! Oh! remember that there was once an occasion when you were even ready to crown my happiness—when the appointment was made—and when your fervid kisses had already given me a foretaste of the elysian joys which I was to experience in your arms. Why, then, have you since been cruel? If I can still long so ardently to possess you, acquainted as I am with the secret of your *first* love—can *you* not efface from your mind the impression which any untoward circumstances with regard to myself may have made upon it? You became the victim of a felon: I took as a mistress the wife of a felon also. On your side, Philip Ramsey exists as the object of aversion and loathing: on mine, the husband of Mrs. Brace stands in a similar light. Now, Eleanor, are we not upon equal terms? Oh! I was wrong, I was wrong to cherish sentiments of vengeance against you—you, who are so grandly beautiful! Let us be friends, then, adorable creature—let us be friends: for I would rather—Oh! ten thousand times rather receive you, yielding and full of voluptuous warmth, to my arms, than compel you, struggling and battling, to submit to my will. Come, then, Eleanor—dearest Eleanor—and let there be naught save love and tenderness between us!"

The Countess of Desborough had sunk back upon the sofa while the Prince was thus appealing to her in an impassioned strain. The thought flashed to her mind that if she yielded to his suit, all chances of exposure would be averted;—and she felt that it were more prudent to establish peace at any sacrifice than be precipitated into open warfare with the Prince. Not that her aversion towards him was by any means mitigated: on the contrary, she abhorred and loathed him with a more intense detestation than ever;—and neither his handsome person nor his honied words were now able to produce the slightest effect upon the sensuality of her temperament. But she saw that he was bent upon accomplishing his purpose: she felt that she was in his power;—and she likewise comprehended too well that any vindictive measures which she might subsequently adopt, would only involve her own exposure without changing the incident of that triumph which he was this night resolute in achieving.

"Oh! I see that you are moved, Eleanor—you are not blind to the prudence of adopting a conciliatory course!" he exclaimed, his desires now goaded to a positive frenzy. "Never did you appear more magnificently beauteous in my eyes;—and instead of henceforth being compelled to regard me as a remorseless, bitter, and uncompromising enemy, you will learn to look upon me as an impassioned adorer and a staunch friend! Come, then, to my arms, thou adorable one—come, and make me happy!"

And placing himself by her side upon the sofa, he took her hand and pressed it fervently to his lips.

The action was unresisted on her part: indeed, she scarcely appeared to notice it—for she was still absorbed in profound reflection, balancing the alternatives between which she had to choose.

Emboldened by his success, the Prince panted all the more longingly for a consummation of his burning passion. He beheld the door at the farther end of the room; and it struck him that it opened into a bed-chamber. Rising gently but hastily from the sofa, he proceeded to satisfy his curiosity in this respect;—and the result of his examination was in accordance with his prescient wishes. Then he carried the wax-candles into that apartment;—and, all this being the work of a few moments, he once more took the hand of the Countess and pressed it to his lips.

"Oh! must I yield, then—must I yield?" she murmured in a faint and tremulous tone;—and, as if her senses were leaving her, did she abandon herself to the embrace in which her royal lover now folded her.

He pressed his lips to hers—he strained her to his breast: but neither the ardent kisses which he bestowed upon her, nor the closeness of that contact in which he held her, excited any scintillation of the fires that on a former occasion he had observed, through the windows of her eyes, to burn so furiously in her soul. Drooping, yielding, and powerless as if it were a mere supple and pliant statue that he folded in his arms, she suffered him to drag rather than lead her into the adjacent chamber.

But scarcely was the threshold passed, when she was recalled to herself by a sudden and thrilling sense of inexpressible hatred and disgust for the man who had that night exercised so cowardly and ferocious a tyranny over her. Had he pursued his advantage while yet she was seated upon the sofa, he would have triumphed—and Eleanor Des-

borough would have been added as another gem to the coronet of his conquests. But that inveterate sensuality which had prompted him to make his happiness as complete as possible, by removing her to the adjoining chamber, suddenly struck her as something from which her mind revolted: she saw that he was treating her as the mere object of his lust, without a single particle of refinement or delicacy in the passion that was animating him;—and all that minute preparation, even to the conveyance of the candles into the sleeping apartment, inspired her with a sudden feeling of unconquerable aversion and disgust.

Nerved all in a moment to the energy of an outraged woman, the Countess of Desborough tore herself from the arms of the Prince;—and, stepping back a few paces, she turned upon him her indignant countenance and her flashing eyes, exclaiming, "No—I prefer a war to the death: and the betrayal of your sister's secret shall avenge any outrage which you may think of offering to me!"

"By heavens! you shall succumb, be the consequences what they may!" cried the Prince, darting forward and winding his arms around her waist.

A scream burst from her lips: at the same instant the outer door of the parlour was flung open—and Tim Meagles, followed by the Earl of Desborough, appeared to the rescue of the Countess.

CHAPTER CXCII.

HIS ROYAL HIGHNESS AND TIM MEAGLES.

At this unexpected occurrence, the Prince gave vent to an exclamation of rage, his hold upon Eleanor relaxing at the same moment,—so that with a comparatively small effort she burst away from him and flew into the arms of her husband.

"Bear her ladyship away, my lord," said Meagles hastily; "and leave me to settle matters with this royal debauchee."

"*You* settle matters with me!" cried the heir-apparent, in a tone of mingled indignation and contempt: then, as he endeavoured to push past Tim Meagles, he said with a malignant look, "Beware how you incur my vindictive displeasure a second time!"

"Your displeasure!" echoed Meagles, in a scornful tone: "I despise it! Now, my lord——"

But on glancing round he saw that the Earl was already crossing the threshold of the parlour, supporting the Countess on his arm: and, making way therefore to permit the heir-apparent to issue from the bed-chamber, Meagles followed him with one of the candles in his hand. The Prince was about to hasten away from the scene of his discomfiture: but the Earl of Desborough banged the outer door in his face—and Meagles, springing forward, locked that door and put the key in his pocket.

"What does this mean, sir?" demanded the Prince, surveying Meagles with a haughty air, which scarcely concealed the sudden tremor that shot with the pang of an ice-shaft transfixing his form. "Ah!" he ejaculated, springing back in dismay, as a pistol which Meagles drew from his breast flashed across his eyes: "would you murder me?"

"Not unless you compel me to wreak summary vengeance upon you," was the calm but resolute reply.

"Put up your weapon, sir!" exclaimed the Prince, assuming the air and tone of a bully rather than the demeanour and voice of conscious authority.

"I would much rather keep it in my hand," said Meagles, coolly: "and I warn your Royal Highness that it is loaded almost to the very muzzle. Whether I am a good shot, or otherwise, your Royal Highness has often had opportunities of judging both in the field and the shooting-gallery."

"In one word, Mr. Meagles," exclaimed the Prince, affecting a half-smile, "what am I to understand by this jesting? Do you wish to win me over by a joke to our ancient friendship? If so, I shall not hesitate to pardon you for the past, and reinstate you in that favour, which you always received at my hands so long as you were worthy of it?"

"Upon my soul, I never was farther off in all my life from the contemplation of a jest," replied Meagles: "but on the other hand I never was so close to the temptation of blowing a man's brains out, as I am at the present moment."

"You dare not use this language to me!" exclaimed his Royal Highness, the flush which his recently maddened desires had left upon his countenance, having by this time paled down into ghastliness.

"I dare address and treat you precisely as you deserve," responded Meagles: "and if you force me to adopt harsh words, a harsher deed will perhaps follow. Now, look you, Prince of Wales," continued Meagles, throwing himself in a leisurely manner upon the sofa, but keeping the pistol in such a direction that the life of his Royal Highness was held as it were in his grasp,—"I have suffered much at your hands, and the day of reckoning is come. You talk of a renewal of your ancient friendship? It is absurd—preposterous! You hate me—and I mistrust you. You will never forgive me for baffling your aims with regard to poor Rose Foster and for being the means of defeating your purpose here to-night: and I shall never forgive you for sending me out of the country. You would pledge your oath *now* to renew your former friendship towards me: but when once you were outside these doors, you would enact your past treachery all over again. You perceive, therefore, that I know your character too well to place any reliance upon your honour as a gentleman, your credit as a man, or your word as a prince. Indeed, I shall not feel easy in my mind, nor disencumber my heart of the load which your perfidy has heaped upon it, until I have expressed my real opinion of you: which is, that you are about as precious a rascal as ever disgraced the human species."

The Prince gave a sudden and convulsive start: but the pistol was instantaneously made to take a deliberate aim at his head, and there was now something so darkly resolute and moodily determined in the manner of Meagles, that the coward nature of the heir-apparent shrank appalled from the ghastly danger which appeared to menace him.

"What do you require of me, Meagles?" he demanded, in a low and hollow tone. "You are aware that I did not act towards you without deep pro-

vocation: for you deprived me of certain important capers——"

"Ah! but when you exercised your power against me," interrupted Tim, sternly, "and had me sent to the Home-Office as a preparatory step to being packed off out of the country, you were not aware that I had possession of your documents. It was only when that French rascal of your's went to pillage and plunder my lodgings, that the incident of the missing papers came to light. Your villanous treachery therefore preceded the discovery of those documents."

"But since you choose to argue the question," said the Prince, endeavouring to pluck up his courage, "let me remind you that *your* treachery in possessing yourself of those papers had been enacted at the time when I adopted harsh measures towards you."

"Yes—because I had all along been aware of your real character," retorted Meagles. "I had obeyed you as a willing instrument—a servile tool—a ready agent: I had done everything that a man could do to deserve kindness at your hands;—and I saw that you meant to throw me overboard and cast me off the instant I should prove no longer useful to you. For that reason did I employ the Amazon to beguile you one day in the bath-room at Carlton House, while I obtained possession of your documents."

"Ah! the Amazon—a veritable demoness!" muttered the Prince, in a tone audible only to himself.

"I do not know what you are saying," observed Meagles: "but I can only assure you that Lady Lade entertains towards you no better feeling than I do, and that any vengeance which I may be prompted to inflict upon you, is as much on her account as on my own."

"But do you know, sir, that you are guilty of high treason in menacing the life of the Prince of Wales?" demanded his Royal Highness, suddenly catching at a threat which, with characteristic arrogance, he fondly and foolishly thought would overawe his enemy in a moment.

"I know that there exists such a law as the one to which you allude," was the calm and indeed contemptuous reply: "but even were I a desperate man, without the glimpse of a loop-hole of escape, I should not hesitate to wreak my vengeance upon you. Much *less*, then, shall I shrink from acting according to circumstances, *now* that I may blow your brains out with the full certainty of getting off scot free."

"What do you mean?" asked the Prince, trembling all over: and, in order to *seem* cool and collected, he took a seat.

"The explanation is easily given and as readily understood," returned Meagles. "His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales employs a resuscitated criminal——Ah! you may well start—I know it all——"

"But who, in the name of God, told you *this*?" demanded the heir-apparent, now trembling like an aspen leaf.

"It is sufficient for our present purpose that I am thus intimately acquainted with all your proceedings," rejoined Meagles. "But, stay," he added, as a sudden thought struck him: "I do not wish you to run away with the notion that the wretched being Ramsey has betrayed *you*. If I permitted you to entertain that thought, your natural vindictiveness would speedily hand him over to the tender mercies of the ordeal which he has once escaped: and I am not barbarous enough to be instrumental in sending the poor devil back to the scaffold—for I suppose that Jack Ketch would do his duty more effectually the next time. I will therefore relieve you from any misapprehension relative to Philip Ramsey; and I will tell you the real truth—which is, that I saw him in St. James's Park—I recognised him as a person of whom I had caught a glimpse on board the *Diana*—I was led by curiosity to watch his movements—and I overheard all that passed during an interview which he had with the Countess of Desborough in the park. Their conversation revealed to me who he was;—and after the Countess left him, the oral utterance which he unguardedly gave to his own thoughts, made me acquainted with the startling fact that he was purchasing his pardon at *your* hands, as the price of placing the Countess in your power."

"The incautious fool!—the idiot!" muttered the Prince. "His folly has wrought all this mischief!"

"Speak out anything you may have to say in comment upon my explanations," cried Meagles: "I do not like those mutterings. Ramsey, you now perceive, has acted foolishly—but not treacherously. When once acquainted with the plot in which you were to figure so conspicuously, I was not the man at all likely to let it pass without an attempt to turn it to my own purposes. I therefore deliberated with the Amazon; and we settled the manner of proceeding. The course indeed was plain and facile enough. I came just now to Stamford Manor, and watched near the garden wall until I saw you enter. I knew your gait, disguised though you were. Then I went round to the front-door and demanded an interview with the Earl. In a few words I explained to him that a trap had been laid to ensnare his wife, and that the Prince of Wales was the intended ravisher or seducer, as the case might be. I stipulated with the Earl that he was to leave me to manage your Royal Highness, as I had an account to settle with you;—and you have just seen how faithfully Lord Desborough has fulfilled his portion of the compact. He does not know, and very probably does not care, whether I mean to send the contents of this pistol through your royal head, or not."

"Can it be possible that the Earl of Desborough has abandoned me to this insult—if to nothing worse?" exclaimed the Prince, almost writhing upon his chair.

"Was it likely that he would remain to thank your Royal Highness for attempting to ravish his wife?" demanded Meagles, with a sneer. "But you do not yet understand how it is that I am in a position to inflict summary vengeance upon you, purely and simply on my own account and that of the Amazon, without incurring the slightest personal danger. Well, I will explain that point as succinctly and as truthfully as I have already informed you how I became aware of the conspiracy wherein yourself and Ramsey have so pleasantly figured. Let us suppose a case. A husband is drawn to a particular room in his house, by hearing his wife scream: he finds her in the arms, not of a mere seducer—but of a ravisher;—and he

blows out the brains of the said ravisher upon the spot. *You*, who have already reminded me of the law of high treason, should be equally well instructed on another point of the English code—which is, that a husband acting in such a manner and under such circumstances, is held to be fully justified by the facts—although the ravisher whom he kills on the spot, be the heir-apparent to the British throne!"

"Good God! can the Earl have employed *you* to assassinate me?" exclaimed the Prince, endeavouring to rise from his chair as all the fearful truth of Meagles' statement burst upon him with overwhelming force: but, crushed by his fears, he sank back again upon the seat, an ice-like tremor shooting through his frame and a cold sweat bursting forth upon his forehead.

"The Earl has done nothing of the kind," responded Meagles: "but he has sworn to follow, with a blind obedience, any course which I may choose to dictate. If, then, I kill you upon the spot, the Earl will stand boldly forth before the world, and, taking upon himself the responsibility of the deed, will declare that in an instant of ungovernable wrath, and not observing who the individual was, he slew the ravisher of his wife!"

"Meagles—my dear Meagles, wherefore should we remain at variance?" cried the Prince, in an imploring tone. "You would not do me an injury—much less carry your vindictiveness to such a point as——But, no—I cannot think it—I dare not contemplate such a horror——"

"And yet you had no remorse for me, when you exerted your secret influence to procure my expatriation," said Meagles, adopting a stern tone: "nor did you manifest the slightest compunction when you sent and ransacked the dwelling of Lady Lade, your myrmidons performing their mission so brutally that they caused the death of the old man to whom she owed so much. Nor pitying her on that account, did you express sorrow or contrition for what had taken place: but you even menaced her with that cowardly virulence which so eminently characterises you. Oh! I have already told your Royal Highness that you are a thorough-paced rascal: and I now tell you, in addition thereto, that you are an accomplished bully."

The heir-apparent winced fearfully under this cutting language;—but his terrors began to evaporate—for he felt assured that Meagles would not prolong the discourse in this manner if he intended to wreak a bloody vengeance. He knew, in fact, that his former friend was naturally good-hearted and generous, and that he was the last individual in existence to perpetrate a deed of deliberate cruelty and wanton atrocity. At the same time, although the Prince thus gathered courage from the reflections which he had now acquired presence of mind sufficient to make, he was not blind to the necessity of using a conciliatory tone and forbearing policy towards the man who still retained the murderous weapon in his grasp,—a weapon the discharge of which might be provoked by defiance or irritation.

"Mr. Meagles," said the Prince, "will you inform me at once the nature of the atonement you require at my hands and the reparation which you expect me to make?"

"In the first place," replied Tim, drawing forth a sheet of paper from his pocket, and reaching down a China inkstand from the mantel, "you will have the kindness to write according to my dictation. Nay—do not fear that I am going to push matters to any extraordinary verge: I shall not compromise you farther than I may deem consistent with prudence and propriety."

"But of what nature is the document I am to draw up?" demanded the Prince, growing bolder now that he felt his way so far as to ascertain that Meagles himself was ready to effect a compromise.

"Leave that to me to dictate," was the stern reply. "And now, Prince of Wales, let me warn you to beware how you attempt to trifle with me in any respect—much less refuse to obey me in the present instance."

"Obey you?" echoed the Prince, mustering up courage enough for the purpose of a last endeavour to assert his authority and overawe the enemy.

"Yes—*obey* me, I said," responded Meagles, in a still sterner tone. "For the man who holds the life of his foe at his disposal, can dictate his own terms. Such are our relative positions. And now be seated at this table—and prepare to write."

The Prince hesitated a moment—but only a moment: for the sharp click of the pistol as Meagles cocked it, fell upon his ear and made his coward heart sink within him. He accordingly placed himself at the table—took up the pen—and began to write to the dictation of Meagles, who now stood close by the chair in which his Royal Highness was seated.

The dictation of the triumphant Tim was to the following effect:—

"I, the undersigned, George Prince of Wales, do hereby acknowledge that, without just provocation of any kind, and simply because Mr. Timothy Meagles is acquainted with many private and secret matters which it would be inconvenient to me to have divulged, I did treacherously and falsely cause certain unfounded charges of sedition to be preferred at the Home Office against the said Timothy Meagles, with a view to procure his deportation to a foreign land;—that those charges had the desired effect, the result being the expatriation of the said Mr. Meagles on a warrant from the Home Office, and without any regular form of legal and constitutional trial;—that, subsequently influenced by threats of exposure at the hands of one of the said Timothy Meagles' most devoted friends, I procured the revocation of the arbitrary sentence pronounced upon him;—that in order to testify my deep regret and thorough contrition for the course which I so despotically pursued, and likewise to afford the injured party such satisfaction as shall prevent him from seeking redress by any means which would result in the exposure of my conduct, I hereby bind myself to pay to the said Timothy Meagles the sum of twenty thousand pounds within one month from the date hereof;—and lastly, I do declare that this document has been drawn up by my own free will, in my own handwriting, and under no other influence than that of my own spontaneous desire to afford full and complete satisfaction to Mr. Timothy Meagles for the grievous injury which he has sustained at my hands.

"*Dated, the 17th day of May*, 1795."

The reader must not suppose that his Royal Highness penned the above document without much wincing at some passages and many remonstrances against others: but on each occasion when he stopped to exhibit either hesitation or anger, or to beseech a mitigation in the pointed severity of the terms in which he was made to speak of his own conduct, the inexorable Meagles presented the pistol to his head and steraly commanded him to proceed. Nothing, therefore, could possibly exceed

the humiliation of that haughty, arrogant, and vindictive man: and at the same time, nothing could exceed the calm and resolute determination which Meagles evinced in thus reducing him to obedience.

"Well, sir," exclaimed the discomfited Prince, scarcely able to subdue his rage, and utterly unable to conceal his mortification,—"I suppose that when I have signed this, you will suffer me to depart?"

"One moment!" ejaculated Tim: "you must not take me for such a fool as to imagine that I will receive a paper which to-morrow morning you would denounce as a forgery. It must be regularly attested: and where can we find a better witness than the nobleman whom you have outraged, and whose vengeance will in some degree be satisfied by the spectacle of your humiliation? Have the kindness to remain here for a few minutes while I proceed in search of the Earl of Desborough."

And without waiting to hear the remonstrance which the Prince began to utter against the plan now suggested, Meagles opened the door—quitted the room—locked the door on the outside—and took away the key in his pocket.

The miserable Prince groaned aloud: then, starting from his chair, he began to pace the room in a condition of fearful mental excitement.

* * * * * *
* * * * *

While this extraordinary scene had been taking place in the parlour where we have just left his Royal Highness a close prisoner, certain explanations were passing between the Earl and Countess of Desborough.

This nobleman, on rescuing his wife from the power of the royal voluptuary, had immediately conducted her to her own apartment, where she sank upon a sofa and gave way to a flood of tears.

The Earl said nothing: not a syllable of either reproach or consolation issued from his lips;—for he was as yet unaware how far his wife merited sympathy, or to what extent her conduct had incurred his blame. The explanations which he had received from Meagles, were necessarily so brief, hurried, and meagre, that his ideas relative to the incident of the evening were confined to the mere knowledge that the criminal Ramsey had returned to England—that he had induced the Countess to grant him a first interview in St. James's Park and a second at Stamford Manor—and that the Prince of Wales was to become his substitute on the latter occasion.

The fit of weeping into which Eleanor burst on being conducted to her apartment, relieved her surcharged bosom and afforded an issue for the fury of all those pent-up feelings that had been agitating her while arguing, reasoning, and eventually battling with the Prince. But one of the first effects of that relief was to afford her leisure to contemplate the position in which she now stood with regard to her husband.

"Francis," she said, in a low and tremulous voice, as she rose from the sofa and accosted the Earl, "do you believe that I encouraged the visit of the Prince to your house?—do you imagine that he came hither by my invitation?"

"I am certain that he did *not*," replied the nobleman, with a mournful gravity of speech and manner: "for I have learnt enough to afford me a glimpse of the whole plot. In a word, Philip Ramsey is in England——"

"Ah! then you know all," ejaculated Eleanor; "and I am spared the pain of much disagreeable explanation. But before another word passes between us, read this," she added, drawing from her bosom the note which she had written in the afternoon: and as she presented it to her husband, the pallor of her countenance changed into the glow of confidence and satisfaction.

The Earl opened the billet, which was addressed to himself, and read as follows:—

"My dearest husband,

"I write these few lines in order to save myself from a fatal misconception on your part, should you by any means obtain a clue to the deplorable circumstances which are now enmeshing me. A person whose name I cannot—dare not commit to paper, has returned to England, and has demanded a last interview with me, as the sole condition upon which he will molest me no more. Overawed by the horrors of past reminiscences, and subdued by the weight of present fears, I have yielded to his desire. But I have prepared weapons to defend myself against the slightest insult;—and I will mercilessly slay that man, if he dare to approach me otherwise than with respect.

"Should he adhere to his solemn promise and content himself with the gratification of that passing whim which has induced him to solicit this interview,—namely, that he may contemplate me for a few moments and for the last time,—it is my intention to keep all this proceeding a secret from my husband. Wherefore afflict him by the revival of the most painful reminiscences? 'Tis I alone who should suffer for the past!

"But should that man drive me to desperation,—should this interview lead to some deplorable catastrophe,—then whatever may be the circumstances, this note will convince you, my dearest husband, that I am true to the pledge which I made you when receiving your forgiveness for my weakness—my frailty—my crime, in regard to *that man!*

"Your affectionate wife,
"ELEANOR."

"This goes far—very far to acquit you in one respect," said the Earl of Desborough, when he had perused the extraordinary billet: "but in another——And yet," he exclaimed, suddenly checking himself, "I know not by what right I dare question your actions, wretched being that I am!"

"Speak—my God! speak," cried Eleanor, clinging to his arm and gazing up wistfully into his countenance. "What do you mean?—how am I open to suspicion? Return to the room whence you have ere now led me away—and upon the floor you will find a broken dagger—on the table the pistol damped with water. Those were the weapons which I had secreted there, and which I would have used against the Prince himself—yes, all Prince though he be—had he not discovered them in the place where they were concealed."

"Oh! if this were true, Eleanor," cried the Earl, "it would be indeed a proof——But you were in the adjacent chamber—and the lights were there," exclaimed the nobleman, once more interrupting himself, as dark suspicions returned to his mind.

"It was in a moment of utter prostration of all mental and bodily powers," said the Countess, now profoundly afflicted at the turn which the conversation was taking,—"that the Prince hastened with the candles into the adjoining room and then bore me thither in his arms. But did I not shriek for help? My brain is becoming confused—and yet methinks that I sent forth a cry of terror——"

"True, true—'tis true, Eleanor—my own dear Eleanor!" exclaimed the Earl, catching with the enthusiasm of delicious joy at that evidence of his wife's fidelity in the adventure of the evening. "And you were struggling in the arms of the Prince——yes—I remember it all now! But I was bewildered—excited—confused——"

"Oh! you can form no idea of the extent to which *my* feelings have been this day wrung!" interrupted Eleanor, clasping her hands together in anguish at the bare recollection of all she had endured. "But tell me that you have confidence in me—that you forgive me for having kept my sorrows and their cause a secret from you——"

"Forgive you, my poor Eleanor!" exclaimed the Earl, pressing her fervidly in his arms: "I was wrong to suspect you even for a moment, after the perusal of that letter! 'Tis for you to pardon me—yes, *me*—for I have been the true source of all your afflictions——"

"Hush! not a word relative to the past," murmured Eleanor, placing her hand upon her husband's lips and concealing her blushing, burning countenance upon his breast.

"Oh! but it requires so little to lay bare again the wound in my heart that nothing can ever heal entirely!" exclaimed the Earl, in a tone of bitter, bitter anguish. "Had I not made you a victim to my insane love—had I not wooed you, young and impassioned as you are, to bind yourself to my side, miserable wretch that I am—you would have become the happy wife of some man who would not have blushed to look you in the face! Then the *one* tremendous incident of your life would never have occurred—your whole destiny would have flowed in another and happier channel—and the accursed wretch whom the very grave seemed to have yielded up to tempt you, would have remained unknown to you save by name!"

"My God! let us not revive the past," exclaimed Eleanor, the tears streaming down her cheeks. "Oh! do not reproach yourself thus!—do not accuse yourself of evils which you never could have foreseen!—do not lift all the blame from my shoulders, in order to take the burthen so generously upon your own!"

But the Earl—the unhappy Earl—continued to deplore his sad fate in the most piteous terms, until the big tears began to roll down his cheeks also: and then Eleanor redoubled her consolations, and lavished upon him such tender caresses that he felt the genial balm of a holy comfort gradually stealing into his wounded soul.

"And now tell me, my dear Francis," said the Countess, "how Mr. Meagles became your companion in this night's adventure—for that gentleman is known to me by sight, and I instantaneously recognised him when you both burst so opportunely into the chamber!"

"When you retired from the dinner-table, Eleanor," returned the nobleman, "I repaired to the library; and soon after nine o'clock one of the servants came to inform me that a gentleman wished to see me immediately upon the most pressing business. I ordered him to be shown into my presence: 'twas Mr. Meagles. In a few hurried words he stated that accident had brought to his knowledge a diabolical conspiracy having for its object the surrender of yourself into the arms of the Prince of Wales. You may conceive the mingled rage, excitement, and alarm into which this announcement plunged me;—and I demanded farther explanations. These were instantaneously given, but necessarily in a rapid and imperfect manner, so as to afford me little more than a partial glimpse into the plot. Nor did he at once inform me *where* and *when* the base attempt was to be made: but, previously to becoming explicit upon that head, he imposed a certain condition——"

"And that condition?" said the Countess, inquiringly.

"Was to the effect that provided he enabled me to rescue you from the toils and snares laid to entrap you, I should leave the Prince to be dealt with according to his will and pleasure, and that I should consent to become a witness to any document which he might think fit to compel his Royal Highness to sign. I swore to fulfil those conditions," added the Earl: "indeed, such was the excitement under which I laboured at the moment, and so great was my indignation against the Prince, that I should not have hesitated to pledge my soul to Satan, in order to accomplish your deliverance and appease the cravings of my own vengeance."

The Countess was on the point of making some remark with respect to the explanation just given by her husband, when a knock at the chamber door was heard. Lord Desborough answered the summons; and a servant informed him that Mr. Meagles requested a few moments' interview with his lordship. The nobleman accordingly hastened to the library where Meagles was anxiously awaiting his presence.

"Now, my lord," said Tim, "you will have the goodness to fulfil your portion of the compact. I have performed mine — and her ladyship was rescued from the power of that villanous Prince."

"I am ready to act as you require, Mr. Meagles," returned the nobleman; "and I thank you most sincerely—most heartily, for your conduct on this occasion. Where is the Prince?"

"In the suite of apartments that was to have proved the scene of his triumph," responded Meagles. "Let us hasten thither."

Lord Desborough accordingly led the way to the room in which his Royal Highness was held captive and when the nobleman entered, followed by Tim Meagles, the royal voluptuary cast a rapid but searching look upon the Earl's countenance to ascertain, if possible, whether there were any hope in that quarter. But the nobleman's features wore a stern and implacable look;—and the Prince, with hastily-averted eyes, muttered to himself, "This wretched impotent will back Meagles in his extortion!"

While this galling reflection was traversing the brain of the heir-apparent, the Earl had caught at a glance the broken dagger and the useless pistol—those evidences of the truth of that narrative which he had received from the lips of his wife. A smile of satisfaction beamed for a moment upon his countenance: but repressing any display of feelings apart from the business now in hand, he flung a look of haughty defiance upon the Prince.

"Does your lordship intend to support this fellow Meagles in his vile endeavour at extortion?" demanded his Royal Highness, assuming a tone and demeanour of lofty arrogance.

"Silence!" cried Meagles, suddenly presenting

his pistol at the head of the heir-apparent: "or I will shoot you like a dog."

The Prince, recoiling in horror and affright, threw upon the Earl a glance of deep meaning—as if to ask whether he, an English peer, would countenance such treasonable conduct towards the heir-apparent. But in the cold stern look of Lord Desborough he perceived too plainly that he had nothing to hope: and, feeling that he was completely in the power of the remorseless Meagles and the outraged husband, he resumed his seat at the table on which the document lay.

"Read it aloud," said Tim, in an authoritative voice, as he pointed to the paper with one hand and levelled the pistol at the Prince with the other.

And the heir-apparent, profoundly humiliated,—but not possessing courage sufficient to resist the treatment to which he was so deservedly subjected—that coward, arrogant, unprincipled, and base-hearted Prince, we say, was compelled to yield a grovelling obedience to the dictates of the man whom he so cordially hated. In a hurried and tremulous tone, and with his cheeks flushing and growing pale by turns, did he read the document which stamped alike his treachery, his cowardice, and his humiliation.

"Now sign it," said Meagles, in a short and abrupt tone of command; "and beware how you venture to indulge in any observations at all injurious to either the Earl of Desborough or myself."

The Prince attached his signature to the document, which the nobleman unhesitatingly attested in the usual style: and Meagles secured the paper about his person.

While he was doing this, the Prince of Wales, plucking up a little courage—to which, by the bye, he was only incited by the goadings of his malignant vindictiveness—seized the opportunity to

whisper in the Earl's ear, "I will be terribly avenged for this! To-morrow all London shall know that Lord Desborough is a miserable impotent, and that his wife has been the mistress of the resuscitated felon Ramsey."

The nobleman became pale as a corpse and staggered back as if struck by a death-blow: but, instantaneously recovering himself, he replied in a low hoarse tone, "Do so—and in the evening I will declare in the House of Lords the conditions upon which that same Philip Ramsey procured a pardon through the interest of the Prince of Wales!"

"Ah! what is that whispering?" suddenly exclaimed Meagles, clutching his Royal Highness forcibly by the arm.

"The Prince menaces me," was the calm observation made by the Earl.

"I thought as much!" ejaculated Meagles. "But, by heavens! we will be terribly avenged upon him, if he dare injure a hair of your lordship's head. And now begone, you Prince of Rascals!" added the indignant Tim, pushing his Royal Highness violently towards the door.

The infuriate Prince would have blurted forth some vindictive menace: but his lips were sealed by the terror of having the contents of the pistol sent after him. The vengeance of Meagles was not however quite completed yet: one last humiliation he burned to inflict upon his royal adversary;—and yet he wavered for a moment. But only for a moment!—the temptation was too strong, and the provocation he had in various ways received was too great, not to overcome all momentary scruples. Accordingly, he placed the pistol upon the mantel—bounded after the Prince—and, applying his foot to the nethermost quarter of the royal voluptuary, kicked him down the stairs.

Oh! crowning infamy—supreme humiliation! A yell of mingled pain and rage burst from the lips of his Royal Highness;—and his retreat by means of the private door of Stamford Manor was accomplished with an almost incredible celerity.

"Now, Mr. Meagles," said the Earl of Desborough, when Tim returned, laughing heartily, to the parlour, after having performed the foregoing feat,—"you must permit me to offer you some testimonial of my gratitude for the service which you have rendered me this night."

"I want nothing, my lord," responded Tim. "You have already done enough for me by attesting this document and thereby confirming its validity beyond all possibility of dispute on the part of the Prince,"

"But inasmuch as you exhibit such a marvellous aptitude for the somewhat difficult task of coping with that unprincipled voluptuary," resumed the Earl,—"and as I myself have no inclination to spare him in the slightest degree, I fancy that a certain little acknowledgment which I possess, and which bears his signature, would prove more useful in your hands than in mine. Without farther preface, therefore, I beg your acceptance of this receipt for twenty thousand pounds, in which the Prince is indebted to me;—and I hope you will succeed in recovering the amount."

"By heavens! this is a gift not to be refused," exclaimed Meagles: "and yet it is a reward a thousand times greater than I can either deserve or look for," added Meagles, as he glanced with sparkling eyes and joyous features over the I.O.U. which the Prince had given the Earl on that memorable night of his sojourn at Desborough House.

"You need not hesitate to accept it—and I require no thanks," said Eleanor's husband. "I should never think of enforcing payment thereof on my own account: but you will not have the same scruples. I bestow it upon you, not only as a proof of gratitude, but likewise as a means of punishing an unprincipled voluptuary."

"On those conditions, my lord, I accept the handsome gift," exclaimed Meagles: "and depend upon it, his Royal Highness shall be speedily brought to book."

Meagles then took leave of the Earl of Desborough, and repaired to the way-side public-house where Wasp had been left in charge of the horses.

CHAPTER CXCIII.

THE SECRET CONCLAVE.

It was about six o'clock in the evening, three or four days after the occurrences just related, that four persons were absorbed in earnest conversation in a small but well-furnished parlour in Bury Street, St. James's.

One was a venerable-looking old man, with white hair, and a demeanour that was at once imposing and calculated to inspire a profound respect. He was dressed in a somewhat old-fashioned style, but with a remarkable precision and neatness; and in the button-hole of his lapelling double-breasted coat he wore the ribband of a foreign order.

The second individual in this group was a fine tall, handsome man, in the prime of life, but with a certain air of dissipation and debauchery beneath the gentility of his appearance. His manners were those of a polished courtier: his apparel was in the best possible taste;—and yet there was a something about him, which, to the eye of the keen observer accustomed to look deeper than the surface, denoted the accomplished rake and finished voluptuary.

The third was a still younger man, of equally aristocratic appearance with the two individuals just presented to our readers—dressed as fashionably and as elegantly as the second—and having all the seriousness of countenance which characterised the first. His age could not have exceeded thirty;—and yet his discourse was as measured, his air as grave, and his demeanour as imposing as if he were far more advanced along the pathway of life.

The first mentioned individual was the Marquis de Saint Croix—the second was the Marquis de Bellois—the third the Duke de Villebelle: and the person who made the fourth in the little knot of deliberators, was the reader's old friend, Mr. Page.

The three first were French noblemen who had been compelled to fly from their native land, on account of their aristocratic station and their political opinions. The Marquis de Saint Croix was the one who had lent twenty thousand pounds to the Prince of Wales a few months previously, at the instigation of the Amazon: the Marquis de Bellois was the object of Mrs. Fitzherbert's passing amour during that lady's temporary residence in

France;—and the Duke of Villebelle was an enthusiastic young nobleman, devoted to the lost cause of Royalty in France, and whose immense estates had been confiscated by the Republican Government of that country.

The room where these refugee nobles were assembled in company with Mr. Page, formed a portion of the lodging rented in the house by the Marquis de Saint Croix;—and the motive of the conference was none other than to devise and project certain schemes for raising once again the Royalist banner in France. The deliberations were chiefly conducted in English, with which the noblemen happened to be tolerably well acquainted: otherwise Mr. Page would have found himself unable to take part in the proceedings, he being utterly ignorant of the French language.

"My lords," said the Marquis of Saint Croix, addressing his two fellow-countrymen, "I will now repeat in the presence of our English friend everything that I have learnt from his lips, and which I have already made known to your lordships—so that should I have either misunderstood or exaggerated any portion of the important communications for which we are indebted to Mr. Page, he can at once set us right upon the subject. I believe, then, that I am correctly informed when I state that Mr. Page is deep in the confidence of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, and that his Royal Highness is most anxious for an attempt to be made in favour of the restoration of Royalty in unhappy, distracted France. Is it not so?"

"Your lordship has stated the matter exactly as it stands," replied Mr. Page, assuming the grave and solemn air that was proper to the deliberations. "Not only does his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales feel the necessity of restoring order in France and rebuilding a legitimate government," he continued, adopting the detestable cant terms and smooth-sounding phrases which are used as a cloak for the most damnable tyrannies and a pretext for all anti-democratic proceedings, —"but the whole Royal Family of England and our blessed Aristocracy partake in the sentiments of the Prince. Under these circumstances his Royal Highness instructed me a fortnight back to throw myself in the way of the most eminent French refugees now residing in London, and sound their views and intentions. Accident led me in the first instance to address myself to his lordship the Marquis of Saint Croix, and secondly to my lord the Marquis of Bellois——"

"And then we communicated with your lordship," added Saint Croix, glancing towards the Duke of Villebelle; "and your lordship, with characteristic patriotism, hastened to respond to our appeal."

"God speed our aims, my friends," said the Duke, his pale but handsome countenance flushing with ardent hope.

"The interest which his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales takes in the affairs of our unhappy country," continued the Marquis of Saint Croix, "is not only most grateful to our feelings, but likewise prompts us to behold the character of his Royal Highness in a new and very favourable light. I must confess that until I became acquainted with Mr. Page, I had experienced some cause to mistrust his Royal Highness and doubt his integrity: but after all the explanations which Mr. Page has given me in his wonted honest and straight-forward manner, and especially after hearing how deeply the Prince is interesting himself in the affairs of distracted France, I have learnt to form a better opinion of the Prince."

"Your lordship had been tutored to think ill of him by that infamous and notorious character, Lady Lade," observed the ex-bagman; "and the statements she made to your lordship appeared to receive confirmation from the fact that his Royal Highness did not immediately restore the money your lordship had placed in his hands. But when I assure your lordship that the Prince will in a few days——"

"No more upon that subject, Mr. Page!" exclaimed the Marquis de Saint Croix. "I deeply regret that I should ever have listened to the insidious and malignant representations of that woman to whose faults my late friend Sir John Lade was so unaccountably blind. I am sorry also that I should ever have persecuted his Royal Highness for the return of money which I did not precisely want, and which I never should want again if the legitimate Monarchy were restored in France."

"His Royal Highness has been enabled to glean much valuable information, I believe, respecting France, from the English Minister of Foreign Affairs?" said the Duke of Villebelle, addressing himself to Mr. Page.

"Such is the fact, may it please your Grace," returned the ex-bagman. "The English Government has for a long time past employed numerous secret agents—or in plainer terms, spies—to travel through some parts of France and fix their abodes in other districts, for the purpose of ascertaining the true feeling of the French people with regard to the existing institutions of the country. The reports that are received at the Foreign Office are numerous and interesting; and their contents are regularly, though privately, communicated to the Prince of Wales. From those reports his Royal Highness has gleaned the most encouraging information with regard to the cause of Monarchy in France; and he feels convinced that if the Royalist banner were raised amidst the fields of La Vendée, hundreds of thousands would enthusiastically flock around it."

"Then hurrah for La Vandée!" exclaimed the Marquis de Bellois, who, being a man of desperate fortunes and as dissipated as he looked, was ready for any enterprise that seemed to promise an amendment of his circumstances. "Your lordship," he added, turning towards the Duke of Villebelle, "has managed to bring over a large sum from France: and that will be enough to commence the undertaking. Money constitutes the sinews of war; and your fifty thousand pounds sterling, now existing in good English Bank notes, if changed into French five-franc pieces, will raise an army of ten thousand men in a short time. Then the Royalists will rush to our banner: their treasures will be drawn forth from the places where they are concealed or buried;—and the accursed Republicans will have to rue the day when a Villebelle, a Saint Croix, and a Bellois put themselves at the head of the movement."

"But if we were to resolve upon quitting England and passing into La Vendée," said the Duke de Villebelle, "we should not be so rash as to take all the available funds with us. We must leave them

deposited with some trustworthy individual in London, to be sent after us by the best possible means, so soon as we found that we were really certain of receiving the support of the leading men in La Vendée."

"His Grace speaks wisely and prudently," observed Mr. Page. "That is the proper course to pursue!"

"Well, my lords," said the Marquis de Saint Croix, "are we resolved upon making the attempt?—shall we at once come to the decision of repairing without delay to our own native land, at all perils and at all risks? For my part, I will be the first to give my vote in the affirmative."

"And I have already intimated my readiness to join in the expedition," observed the Marquis de Bellois. "We will either restore the throne or give our heads to the guillotine."

"Amen," said the Duke of Villebelle, solemnly. "And now, my lords, we have two points to determine upon. The first is, when shall we set off?—and the second is, to whom shall we entrust the money which I have at present lying in a London bank?"

"With regard to the first point," said De Bellois, "I should advise that no unnecessary delay take place. In fact, I am prepared to start to-morrow morning."

"I may as well observe," exclaimed Mr. Page, "at this stage of the proceedings,—I mean, since the money question is about to be touched upon,—that his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales authorised me this very day to assure the Marquis de Saint Croix that the twenty thousand pounds due to his lordship shall be paid in a week's time. I was about to mention this fact just now, when his lordship bade me speak no more upon the subject. But the incident becomes of importance at this stage of the proceedings, inasmuch as I shall cheerfully hold myself bound to undertake a trip to La Vendeé and convey to his lordship the Marquis the sum of money to which I am referring."

"Your conduct, Mr. Page, is most admirable!" exclaimed the venerable Marquis de Saint Croix, seizing him by the hand and pressing it warmly. "*You* also, then, must feel profoundly interested in our cause, as well as your royal patron, the Prince of Wales?"

"I will throw myself heart and soul into it," said Mr. Page, affecting the fervour of enthusiasm. "It is the cause of order against chaos—justice against anarchy. You may command me, my lords, in all respects—humble an individual though I be."

The Duke of Villebelle and the Marquis de Bellois followed the example of the venerable Saint Croix by offering due acknowledgments to Mr. Page for his seeming devotion to their cause;—and then the three nobles began to converse together for a few minutes in their own native language—but not without having previously apologised to their English companion for this temporary exclusiveness in the deliberations.

"Mr. Page," at length said the Marquis de St. Croix, when the discussion in French was brought to a conclusion, "their lordships and myself have come to the determination to solicit, through your medium, a particular favour of his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales. I have recommended this proceeding, in order to convince his Royal Highness of my deep repentance for having persecuted him with demands for the repayment of the amount due to me at a time when the Prince was really unable to meet my claim: and the Duke of Villebelle is anxious to afford his Royal Highness a proof of the importance which we attach to his countenance and co-operation in the projects now under discussion. In a word, then, Mr. Page, do you think that his Royal Highness would consent to become the guardian of the Duke of Villebelle's funds, until such time as we may have settled all our plans in La Vendée?"

"I could not possibly take it upon myself to return a positive answer," replied the ex-bagman, shaking his head gravely. "But if your lordships be anxious to have the point cleared up without delay, I will hasten to Carlton House at once and endeavour to obtain a few minutes' audience of his Royal Highness previous to the dinner-hour."

This proposal was welcomed with thanks; and Mr. Page immediately took his departure. But instead of repairing to Carlton House at all, he entered the nearest tavern, where he ordered and discussed a pint of sherry;—and having thus whiled away about half-an-hour, he returned to the noble refugees at the Marquis de Saint Croix' lodgings.

For the benefit of those who are not acquainted with London, we may as well observe that Bury Street was not more than five minutes' walk from Carlton House; and therefore Mr. Page had been quite long enough absent to induce a belief that he had succeeded in obtaining an interview with the Prince. He accordingly found the three noblemen on the tiptoe of expectation concerning the result of his mission: for they flattered themselves that the course which they had adopted with regard to the Prince would lead him to afford their cause all the assistance he might be enabled to vouchsafe it.

"I have succeeded, my lords," said Mr. Page, on returning to the apartment: "but not without some degree of difficulty. The Prince would not listen to the proposal at first: he declared that he would never again become the custodian of any foreign refugee's funds. But when I explained to his Royal Highness how necessary it was that some trustworthy treasurer should be found for the money, inasmuch as no London banker could at present undertake to remit large sums to France, especially in a secret manner,—and when I assured his Royal Highness that I was willing to convey the money over to La Vendée when the proper time should arrive, even though I might be compelled to undertake three or four journeys backward and forward for the purpose,—then did his Royal Highness yield to my representations and empower me to return to your lordships with an affirmative reply."

"We owe you a deep debt of gratitude, Mr. Page," said the Duke of Villebelle. "It is a material point gained. But did his Royal Highness specify a time when I may wait upon him and deposit the funds in his hands?"

"To-morrow evening, at six o'clock, my lord," answered the ready-witted Mr. Page, who was the last man in existence to be at a loss for a satisfactory reply when one was needed.

"Thus far, then, are our plans settled, my lords," said the Duke de Villebelle. "We will now arrange the time of our departure from London and the route we shall adopt to enter France."

"I will therefore take my most respectful leave of your lordships," observed Mr. Page; "inasmuch as his Royal Highness has given me an important commission to execute for him, and my humble advice

will not be needed in respect to the points which your lordships are now about to discuss."

The ex-bagman accordingly took his departure;—and this time, on issuing forth from the lodgings of the Marquis de Saint Croix, he bent his way direct to Carlton House.

CHAPTER CXCIV.

THE HEIR-APPARENT AND HIS AGENT.—SHICKSTER SAL.

It was now eight o'clock in the evening; and the Prince of Wales had just quitted the dinner-table—for he was aware that Mr. Page was to call upon him at that hour. The ex-bagman was accordingly at once shown into the presence of his Royal Highness, whom he saluted with a bow that was as profoundly reverential and as servilely low as an eastern salaam.

"Well, Page—what news?" demanded the Prince, pointing to a chair near the sofa on which he himself was seated in a reclining posture.

"I have two pieces of excellent tidings for your Royal Highness," answered the busy, bustling, obsequious individual who had managed to thrust himself into the service of the Prince. "But first, may I be permitted most humbly to inquire whether your Royal Highness is at liberty this evening for a few hours?"

"Your letter of this morning contained a promise which induced me to put aside every appointment," returned the Prince. "Tell me, then, in a word—will Pauline be mine to-night?"

"Beyond all question, may it please your Royal Highness," was the immediate response.

"Egad! it does please me infinitely, I can assure you, friend Page," observed the heir-apparent. "And now, what of the refugees?"

"They have fallen completely into the views which I have studied to develop to them, your Royal Highness," answered Page. "It is not proper for a man to sing his own praises: but I flatter myself that I *may* take credit for having managed this business with no ordinary degree of tact and judgment. The Marquis de Saint Croix firmly believes that it was by mere accident I addressed myself to him in the first instance——"

"And the Marquis de Bellois?" exclaimed the Prince, interrogatively.

"His lordship lies under a similar impression," rejoined Page: "that is to say, he supposes that it was without any sinister design that I fixed upon him as one of the most proper and fitting refugees to be sounded relative to the proposed incursion into France."

"And when I saw you the day before yesterday," observed the Prince, "you told me that those noblemen had taken a third into their confidence—the Duke of Villebelle. Is he also without suspicion?"

"Entirely, great Prince!" exclaimed the ex-bagman. "And of this he will afford your Royal Highness a sterling proof to-morrow evening, by depositing forty or fifty thousand pounds in your hands."

"The devil he will!" ejaculated the Prince, literally bounding upon the sofa with joy. "But how has this been brought about?"

Mr. Page now explained all that had just taken place at the lodgings of the Marquis de Saint Croix—not omitting to state how he had absented himself for half-an-hour on pretence of obtaining the consent of his Royal Highness to become the depositary of the Duke's treasure.

"You have managed the business in a masterly style!" exclaimed the heir-apparent, rubbing his hands gleefully: then, after a few moments' pause, he said, "But how did you arrive at the conviction that I would agree to become the treasurer of these refugees?"

"If I have done wrong," answered Page, with a smile of sly significancy, "I implore the pardon of your Royal Highness."

"No, no, my good fellow," cried the Prince, laughing; "you have not done wrong—very far from it. But you are a man of keen penetration."

"Somewhat so, illustrious patron!" returned Page. "Your Royal Highness condescended to inform me that you were anxious to be avenged upon the Marquis de Saint Croix for persecuting you on account of that paltry sum which he placed in your royal hands; and that the same vindictive sentiment was extended towards the Marquis de Bellois, for a reason which your Royal Highness did *not* explain, and which I of course do not attempt to penetrate. Well, when I found that these noblemen had fallen so admirably into the snare laid for them, and that they had so innocently drawn the Duke of Villebelle into the meshes spread out to catch themselves, I thought within myself that if some one must profit in the long run by being the depositary of the Duke's wealth, your Royal Highness should be that fortunate individual. Therefore, I took the liberty of declaring that your Royal Highness would accept the trust."

"I again repeat that you are a man of great penetration," said the Prince; "and I may add that you will do honour to the Order of Knighthood."

The ex-bagman rose from his seat and made three distinct bows, each more profound than the former.

"And now tell me about Pauline," exclaimed the Prince.

"For the first time since the removal of Octavia a month ago and upwards," replied Mr. Page, "Pauline has begun to exhibit a neighbourly feeling;—and my excellent wife has persuaded upon her to take tea with her this evening. The poor thing has doubtless begun to experience an intolerable loneliness; and she looks upon Mrs. Page as a kind-hearted, well-meaning creature, who can sympathise with her."

"Then she does not entertain the least suspicion that you were instrumental in procuring the confinement of her sister in a private mad-house?" said the Prince, interrogatively.

"She could not possibly have formed the remotest conjecture on the subject," returned Page. "It was all done so cleverly. A few guineas obtained the necessary certificates from a couple of drunken, profligate doctors, named Wigton and Smanks, who happen to be acquaintances of mine;—and they will not let the cat out of the bag for their own sakes. Then there is Dr. Burton, the keeper of the lunatic-asylum, who is still more directly interested in maintaining a profound secrecy relative to the transaction: for he would

not like to lose the three hundred a-year which I have undertaken to pay him on your Royal Highness's behalf, for the maintenance of Miss Octavia."

"And has Pauline given up wandering about the vicinage of the asylum where her sister is shut up?" asked the heir-apparent.

"Scarcely a day passes that she does not take a hackney-coach and repair to Stoke Newington to call at Dr. Burton's establishment and inquire for Octavia," responded Page. "But the doctor invariably assures her that some few weeks may yet elapse ere her sister's mind will be so far restored to a state of equanimity as to justify him in permitting an interview between them. And Pauline feels herself so utterly powerless in the matter, and has discovered that the law is so completely on the side of the course which has been adopted, that she now appears to have yielded resignedly to the progress of those events against which she can offer no effectual resistance. Ah! it is a capital law which allows an obnoxious or dangerous person to be locked up for life, on the certificates of a couple of bribeable doctors!"

"To be sure it is," exclaimed the Prince. "I do not know how we should get on in the world without the aid of such laws occasionally. The rich and the powerful, the titled and the great, Mr. Page, must have some means of keeping their enemies in subjection and disarming dangerous individuals of their sting."

"Your Royal Highness argues with the most perfect wisdom," said the obsequious Mr. Page. "But it is now getting on for nine o'clock," he observed, looking at his watch; "and Julia—that is to say, Mrs. Page—will presently make the young lady so safe that your Royal Highness will find no trouble in enjoying a blissful triumph."

"What do you mean?" demanded the Prince. "How does your wife intend to proceed?"

"At nine o'clock the supper-tray is to be taken up," answered the ex-bagman, lowering his voice to a mysterious whisper; "and whether Miss Pauline should fancy a glass of port, or a glass of sherry, or only a tumbler of mild porter, the result will be all the same: for our servant-girl is in the secret—she is trustworthy, and we can rely upon her——"

"I comprehend you," interrupted the Prince, the blood glowing in his veins as he feasted his salacious imagination upon the charms which he hoped that night to defoliate of their virgin innocence. "Come, let us be gone!"

The Prince accordingly summoned Germain, whom he directed to order a plain carriage to be got ready without delay; and in the course of a quarter of an hour his Royal Highness and Mr. Page were rolling along in the vehicle towards the Edgeware Road.

It was about half-past nine when the carriage stopped within a short distance of the ex-bagman's residence in Paradise Villas;—and Mr. Page entered the house first, to ascertain whether the contemplated treachery had been put into execution. The Prince remained in the vehicle: but he was not kept waiting many minutes—for his obsequious agent soon returned with the welcome intelligence that Miss Pauline Clarendon was in a condition that left her entirely at his mercy.

The Prince, scarcely able to restrain his joy at the idea of experiencing the speedy consummation of all his lustful hopes in that quarter, now alighted from the carriage and followed Mr. Page into the house.

The vehicle, according to orders previously issued, then drove away.

* * * * * *
* * * * *

In the meantime a scene which we must here pause to relate, was occurring in the immediate vicinity of Mr. Page's abode.

Seated at a table in the tap-room of a low public house, the Gallows' Widow, the Kinchin-Grand, and Carrotty Poll were engaged in an earnest conversation, which they carried on in whispers. They were alone together in that room; and the landlord of the house was none other than their old accomplice Briggs, who by means of an immense wig and a pair of green spectacles was enabled to defy the penetration of the keenest thief-taker in the metropolis. The two women and the Kinchin-Grand therefore felt perfectly at home at the sign of the *Black Boy*: but the habit of caution, combined with the fear of being overheard by any chance customer who might enter the house, prompted them to conduct their deliberations in a low voice and a guarded manner.

The Kinchin-Grand was as shabby and ill-looking as ever: and the naturally vixenish temper of Carrotty Poll appeared to have derived a keener edge from the misfortunes which had overtaken her sire, the Big Beggarman, who was then in gaol awaiting his trial for piracy, murder, and heaven only knows how many other crimes. As for the Gallows' Widow, the reader may rest assured that she was not rendered more amiable or forbearing towards her enemies by the position of her paramour the Magsman, who was in a predicament precisely similar to that of Stephen Price. She had for some time past abandoned her mourning garb, and was attired in a plain unassuming manner, not altogether deficient in neatness.

"Well," said Carrotty Poll, after a glass of hot spirits-and-water had been passed round, "we are now at length in a fair way to be revenged somewhat on those cursed Pages, and also to get a certain high personage completely into our power."

"And if everything turns out as we expect," observed the Gallows' Widow, in her usual quiet way, "your father, Poll, and my flash man will be certain to be got off some how or another."

"Now, my fair friends," said the Kinchin-Grand, exultingly, "you'll admit that I was the chap to give you the advice which has put things in such a glorious train. When you wanted to cut the throats of that scoundrel Page and his precious wife Julia, didn't I tell you that it was no good risking your necks for sich-like scum?—and didn't I say that if you'd only plant a spy upon 'em, they was such intriguing, cunning, money-making folks, you'd soon find out somethink about their proceedin's worth turnin' to your own account? I'm glad you gave way to my advice in the matter; and now you'll reap the benefit of it. Ah! it was a capital dodge making Shickster Sal dress herself up neat and nice and apply at their house for a situation as a maid-of-all-work! There never was a better spree in all the world: and then the false character which she got made everthing right at once."

"Well, well," interrupted Carrotty Poll, petulantly; "what is the use of reminding us of all that has been done in the matter? We don't deny that your plan has worked well, Bill——"

"On the contrary," said the Gallows' Widow, "we give you all possible credit for it. Indeed, if things turn out to-night as we expect, it will be through having adopted your advice that we shall save Poll's father and Joe Warren from swinging at Execution Dock. So you perceive, Bill, that I at least am not unmindful of the great service you will have rendered us. I suppose your young woman can be fully relied upon?"

"Like bricks and mortar," answered the Kinchin-Grand. "There isn't a better gal in all the world, though I say it, than the Shickster. Why, you may judge for yourselves, I think. Hasn't she given us every information of all wot has been passing at the Pages' house for the last month—indeed, from the fust day she succeeded in getting herself taken into their service as a maid-of-all-work:—and isn't it through her that we're awake to the dodge that's being practised to-night at their house? Ah! Mr. Page little thinks that the dirty drab he once saw with her arms round my neck at the *Kinchin-Kes* in Grub Street, is the same neat and tidy-looking gal which has been in his service for the last month! And it was a lucky thing, too, that Julia and Shickster Sal had never knowed each other. But here she is, by jingo!"

This ejaculation was elicited by the entrance of that same young creature whom we introduced to our readers in a very early chapter of this narrative, and whom we represented at the time to have received the flash name of *Shickster Sal* from the circumstance of having been tenderly brought up until she was enticed away from home and plunged into the loathsome vortex of proffigacy. Her appearance was now much altered: she was apparelled with neatness—her person was cleanly—and she was far from being an ill-looking young woman. The respectable nature of her early training had enabled her to take with a prompt aptitude to the duties of the domestic situation which she was now filling in Mr. Page's house;—and her blind infatuation towards the Kinchin-Grand rendered her a suitable agent to carry out the designs of those who had suggested her introduction into that establishment.

"Well, my dear Sal," exclaimed her paramour, welcoming her with a caress; "what news?"

"It's all right," returned the young woman. "Miss Clarendon partook of the drugged wine—and the Prince has this moment arrived."

"Then there's no time to be lost!" said Carrotty Poll, springing from her seat. "Lead the way, Sal—there's a dear—and we'll follow at a little distance."

"You'll come round to the back gate, mind," was the injunction now given by Shickster Sal: "and don't be more than a couple of minutes after me."

She then hurried away;—and the three accomplices whom she left behind in the tap-room, exchanged looks of exulting triumph.

"Isn't she a regular blessin' to a man, that gal?" demanded the Kinchin-Grand, who was far more proud of her than he would have been, were she a paragon of moral excellence.

The Gallows' Widow and Carrotty Poll both passed some compliments upon the dexterity, astuteness, and fidelity of Shickster Sal;—and the Kinchin-Grand was hugely delighted at the encomia thus lavished upon his mistress. He and the two women then quitted the tap-room—nodded significantly to Briggs as they passed by the bar where he was serving his customers—and issued from the public-house.

Skirting the row of gardens attached to Paradise Villas, ran a narrow lane into which the back gates of those little enclosures opened: and along this alley did the trio proceed at a rapid rate. On reaching the gate belonging to Page's garden, they found Shickster Sal waiting for them;—and with the utmost caution did she introduce them into the house.

CHAPTER CXCV.

THE INTRUDERS.

It was now past ten o'clock;—and lights were burning in a bed-chamber at Mr. Page's abode.

Upon the couch in that apartment lay Pauline Clarendon, completely dressed, but with her luxuriant hair all dishevelled. Having been prevailed upon by the treacherous Julia to take a glass of wine at supper, she had almost instantaneously fallen into a condition of complete stupefaction;—and in that state was she borne up to the bed-chamber by Mrs. Page and Shickster Sal, who had apparently lent herself with willingness to the infamous designs of her mistress.

Yes—upon that couch reposed the defenceless maiden,—utterly unconscious of the perils which environed her. Nothing could be more graceful than the total abandonment as it were to which her form was surrendered up: for precisely in the same position in which she had been deposited by Julia and the servant, was she now lying on that bed. Her garments, the least thing drawn up, revealed the well-shaped foot and the rounded ankle as far as the robust swell of the leg: her arms reposed in the motionless grace of a gentle curvature;—and her lips, slightly apart, afforded glimpses of the pearly teeth.

And over her leant the Prince of Wales: over that sleeping, almost inanimate form he leant—his eyes devouring her charms with a gloating avidity. As the boa-constrictor holds its prey in its hideous coils for a long time ere it appeases its appetite with the luscious festival—so did the reptile voluptuary feast his imagination with the delicious banquet of beauty that lay before him. His looks wandered slowly from that flood of dark brown hair which covered the pillow with its glossy luxuriance, to the cheeks that were deeply flushed by the influence of the narcotic;—thence to the snowy neck that was slightly arched as if softly yielding to the weight of the drooping head, as the stalk of a tulip retains a gentle curve even when snapped from its root and lying upon the ground. And from that beauteous neck of such dazzling whiteness, the sensuous eyes of the Prince wandered to the bosom, the rising and falling of which were so long and slow, as if measured, and likewise so little perceptible. But he devoured with his satyr looks as much of those round white globes as Pauline's modest dress left revealed;—and the

undulations which the dress itself took from the rich contours of her bust, enabled him to finish and complete in his imagination the fine proportions of those hills of snow. In sooth, the entire spectacle of that exquisitely modelled form, stretched with all the abandonment of its flowing length of limb upon the couch, was enough to overcome the scruples of a saint, much less excite almost to madness the furious desires of that royal voluptuary.

For several minutes did he contemplate the lovely being whom he now fancied to be entirely in his power: for several minutes did he gloat over the glorious creature whom he looked upon as a sure and certain victim to his burning lusts. He stooped down—he was about to fasten his lips to that mouth which was so rich in its moist redness—he was on the point of sucking in the pure fragrance of the breath that came slowly and heavily: when, hark! a sound is heard—the handle of the door is turning—that door which he had forgotten to fasten!

But even while still bending over the sleeping beauty, he paused and listened, without absolutely raising himself to his wonted upright carriage: for he fancied that his ears must have deceived him. Another moment—and the door opens—and footsteps are stealing in! He starts—he springs to an upright posture—he turns hastily round—and he beholds intruders of no welcome aspect entering the apartment!

"Away with you!" exclaimed the Prince, advancing towards Carrotty Poll, the Gallows' Widow, and the Kinchin-Grand. "Depart this moment—or I will give the alarm that thieves are in the house."

"You don't dare do it, Prince of Wales," said Carrotty Poll. "If so, you'd only be exposing yourself."

"But who are you?—and what do you require?" demanded his Royal Highness, who had stamped his foot with vexation when the red-haired young woman's words showed that he was recognised by the intruders. "You want money, doubtless? Well, I will give you a few guineas——"

"No—we want to have a conversation with your Royal Highness on very particular business," interrupted the Gallows' Widow.

"With me?—and to-night? Impossible!" ejaculated the Prince, glancing towards the bed, on which Pauline Clarendon still lay steeped in unconsciousness.

"We mean with you—and we also mean to-night," said the Gallows' Widow, in her quiet but resolute tone. "In plain terms, our presence here just at the very moment when you thought of being happy,"—and she flung a significant look towards Pauline,—"is not a mere accident. It is altogether a planned and pre-arranged thing."

"What! has that scoundrel Page been playing me false?" cried the Prince, now trembling for the safety of the *other* secrets of which the ex-bagman was the depositary. "By heaven! I will be signally avenged for this!"

"Nonsense!" exclaimed Carrotty Poll, petulantly. "Page has got nothing at all to do with it. On the contrary, he and his wife are safely and securely locked in the parlour down stairs—and their own servant girl is mounting guard over them with a horse-pistol. So your Royal Highness perceives that all proper precautions have been taken."

"But once more, who are you?—and what do you want?" demanded the heir-apparent, every instant becoming more and more troubled by the mysterious words and self-sufficient manner of these intruders.

"I'll speak fast, most illustrious Prince," said the Kinchin-Grand, taking off his hat with mock ceremony. "Know, then, that I'm a sort of Prince in my way: that is, I'm captain of as jolly a pack of juvenile rogues and rascals, prostitutes and thieves, as ever was met together in this blessed country. They call me the Kinchin-Grand: and I'm very much at the service of your Royal Highness, if you ever want anything done in my way."

"Enough, sir!" ejaculated the Prince, turning from the young reprobate in loathing and disgust. "Now, my good women, who are you?—and what do you require of me? Be explicit and brief—and let us put as speedy an end as possible to this business."

"My name is Mary Price," said Carrotty Poll; "and I am the daughter of a certain Stephen Price, better known in some places as the Big Beggarman."

"And I am the mistress of one Joseph Warren, better known as the Magsman," observed the Gallows' Widow, keenly watching the effect which this announcement would produce upon his Royal Highness.

The Prince had started visibly when the name of the Big Beggarman, which was far from unfamiliar to his ears, had been mentioned by Carrotty Poll: but his features indicated a still more profound trouble at the words of Elizabeth Marks, the Gallows' Widow.

"And what is it that you require of me?" demanded the Prince, summoning all his presence of mind to his aid: for the unpleasant nature of the position in which he now found himself, was full of peril and perplexity as well as of annoyance.

"We will explain ourselves in a few words," said the Gallows' Widow, taking upon herself the office of spokeswoman. "Stephen Price, the father of this young woman, is now in gaol, waiting his trial for piracy and murder. My man, Joe Warren, is exactly in the same difficulty—and, indeed, in the same place. The evidence will be tolerably strong against them: and besides, their previous characters will be quite enough to get them found guilty and condemned to death. But they must not die—their lives must be spared, even though upon the condition of transportation for the rest of their days. You see, Prince, we do not ask too much—we are moderate in our demands——"

"Well, well," interrupted his Royal Highness, hoping to get rid of his present petitioners by means of a promise that he never intended to fulfil,—"your wishes shall be complied with—and I pledge myself to procure a commutation of those men's sentences, whenever the trial may take place."

"We are much indebted to you, Prince," said the Gallows' Widow.

"And we'll do you a good turn some day or another," added the Kinchin Grand.

"Well—now our business is ended, worthy people," exclaimed his Royal Highness; "and you can take your departure as quickly as you came. Upon my promise you may rely——"

"But we would rather have it in writing, Prince," observed the Gallows' Widow, with her wonted im-

perturbability of manner;—"and we should like the document sealed with that signet-ring which your Royal Highness wears upon your right hand," she added, pointing to the jewel itself.

"What! you will not take my word—my solemnly pledged promise?" cried the Prince. "Then be off—depart—I defy you!"

"Ah! but we are not to be defied, most illustrious Highness!" exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand. "Page's servant-gal is my blowen—and 'tis she who has put us up to the whole business about that young lady there," he added, looking towards Pauline, who still remained buried in a profound lethargy.

"That is true, Prince," said the Gallows' Widow, speaking without any excitement in her manner, and yet with a certain ominous significancy in her tone. "The entire proceeding is known to us in all its details;—and I ask you, Prince, what the world would say if we were to raise an alarm and bring a mob to see how his Royal Highness employs people to administer narcotic drugs to innocent young ladies, in order that he may have an opportunity of ravishing and deflowering them."

The royal voluptuary was staggered—and a mortal pallor overspread his countenance: for he saw that he was entirely in the power of a set of desperate characters. Resistance was vain—refusal was useless; and exposure was to be averted at any sacrifice. He could not make his position much worse by giving the required promise in writing: it would be a more prudent alternative than that of leaving the wretches then present to have recourse to any extreme measures which they might choose to adopt. For were his conduct towards Pauline Clarendon made public, he would be irrecoverably disgraced in the national estimation, if not altogether ruined in his prospects as heir to the throne. The situation was grave and serious; — and he inwardly cursed his folly in allowing his brutal passions to

hurry him into such a dilemma. But regrets were now useless;—and he must make the best retreat he possibly could from a most ignominious and perilous difficulty.

"You require a written pledge to the effect that I will interest myself on behalf of those men whom you have named?" he said, after a few moments' hurried communing with himself.

"That is what we require," exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand.

"Hold your tongue, Bill," cried Carrotty Poll, in her sharp vixenish tones; "and let Lizzy Marks conduct the business."

"We not only require such a pledge as your Royal Highness has mentioned," said the Gallows' Widow; "but likewise a positive undertaking that its object shall be carried into effect. In plain terms, we demand and stipulate that you shall guarantee us the lives of Stephen Price and Joseph Warren. More we cannot ask for. We do not insist upon free pardons: those, we are well aware, you could not procure, all Prince though you are. But we feel assured that you *can* obtain a commutation of the death-sentences which are certain to be passed——"

"And we will agree that my father and Joe Warren shall be transported for life," added Carrotty Poll, seeing that the Gallows' Widow hesitated for a moment. "But we won't let them be hanged."

"Egad! you are usurping powers which I cannot pretend to possess myself," exclaimed the Prince. "But I will give you the written undertaking, notwithstanding——"

"Sealed by your signet-ring," remarked the Gallows' Widow. "Otherwise you may deny your handwriting to-morrow morning."

"And here are pens and paper all ready," said Carrotty Poll. "We brought them with us to prevent any delay from taking place. There is an inkstand upon the mantel."

"Affairs of this kind are multiplying thick upon me," thought the Prince within himself, as he remembered the agreement which he had been compelled to sign in favour of Tim Meagles a few days previously: but anxious to put an immediate end to the present scene, and fearing lest Pauline should be awakened and thus escape his libidinous intent, the royal voluptuary sate down at the table and hastily drew up in writing the promise that was demanded at his hands.

While he was thus engaged, Carrotty Poll whispered to the Gallows' Widow, "What shall we do when he has finished the document? Are we to leave Miss Clarendon in his power?"

"Can you think of such a thing for a moment?" asked Lizzy, in the same subdued tone as that in which the Big Beggarman's daughter spoke. "Has not Lord Florimel behaved in the handsomest manner towards us?—did he not give us five hundred pounds on account for the services we were to perform?—and will he not reward us with a proportionate liberality when we tell him how we rescued Miss Pauline from the embraces of that wretched voluptuary? His lordship is out of town now: but he will doubtless return shortly——"

"I am sure I don't want to help the Prince in any of his tricks," interrupted Carrotty Poll. "He is one of the people's worst oppressors—and I hate him on that account. Besides, as you say, it is more to our interest to keep right with Lord Florimel."

"And in addition to all that," interposed the Kinchin-Grand, who listened attentively to the whispered dialogue of his female accomplices, "you know that Shickster Sal pleaded on behalf of that Miss Clarendon, who, she says, is a nice young lady and oughtn't to be harmed. Sal has taken quite a fancy to Miss Clarendon; and we musn't do anything that will displease the Shickster after she's behaved so well in all this here business."

"Then we'll just put a stopper on the Prince's proceedings," said Carrotty Poll, "the moment we've got the document safe in our possession. And then we'll deal with those cursed Pages——"

"And take an instalment of our vengeance," added the Gallows' Widow, with an ominous look—as much as to imply that a far deeper retaliation than any which they this night sought, would be vented in the long run against the ex-bagman and his wife.

"Now, I have finished this paper," suddenly exclaimed the Prince of Wales, who had several times, while engaged in writing, observed with uneasiness the low and earnest whispering that was going on amongst the three intruders.

"Let us read it," said the Gallows' Widow: and taking up the paper, which was duly signed and sealed, she perused it with deliberation, the Kinchin-Grand reading it over her shoulder on one side and Carrotty Poll doing the same on the other. "That will do," she observed, calmly folding it up and securing it in her bosom: "and now your Royal Highness can take your departure."

"Take my departure!" ejaculated the Prince, struck with dismay. "You mean that *you* are about to take your departure!"

"Indeed, I mean no such thing," said the Gallows' Widow, coldly but firmly. "Come—no more words—but be off! We are here to protect Miss Pauline Clarendon—and not to aid in her ruin."

"But this proceeding on your part," urged the Prince, "is not calculated to ensure my countenance and support."

"Perhaps not," returned Lizzy Marks, laconically. "But this paper will do so," she added, laying her hand upon her bosom.

"Can nothing move you?" demanded the Prince, in a tone of the bitterest vexation. "Money—any amount you require—a hundred guineas——"

"A hundred fiddlesticks!" ejaculated Carrotty Poll, in an acrid tone of contempt. "For every guinea you can offer us to betray Miss Clarendon, we shall receive two for protecting her. So one word is as good as forty; and if your Royal Highness was to stand there arguing with us for an hour, it would be no use."

"Not a ha'porth," added the Kinchin-Grand, by way of clenching the argument.

"Then I shall not condescend to argue the point any farther," said the heir-apparent, trembling with a rage to which he dared not give vent.

And stalking forth from the chamber where his anticipated triumph had been so signally changed into the bitterest disappointment, he hastily descended the stairs—put on his hat and cloak in the hall—and quitted the house, smarting under a sense of the most painful humiliation, and cursing his unlucky stars which appeared to be so completely in the ascendant.

CHAPTER CXCVI.

CONCLUSION OF THE SCENES AT MR. PAGE'S ABODE.

THE moment the Prince had taken his departure, the Gallows' Widow approached the bed and shook Pauline gently by the shoulder. The slumbering maiden was only partially aroused; and, turning round upon the other side, she sank back again into a deep lethargy. The Gallows' Widow then proceeded to bathe her forehead with water; and Pauline began to revive slowly.

As consciousness returned, she opened her eyes and gazed vacantly upon the countenances of the three forms that stood by the couch. Then a vague terror seized upon her—and a faint scream escaped her lips, as her features displayed all the signs of that alarm which had taken possession of her soul. But the Gallows' Widow hastened to breathe reassuring words in her ears.

"Do not be frightened, young lady," she said: "we are friendly disposed towards you—and the proof is that we have just delivered you from a terrible danger of which you have been wholly unconscious."

"A danger?" murmured Pauline: then, pressing her hand to her throbbing temples, she strove to collect her scattered ideas and arrange her confused reminiscences. "Ah! I recollect," she suddenly cried, raising herself to a sitting posture in the bed: then, flinging a hasty and agitated look around, she said, "Where am I?"

"In a chamber at Page's house," returned the Gallows' Widow. "You have been the object of a foul conspiracy—and nothing could have saved you from falling its victim also, if we had not come to your rescue. The wine you drank at supper was drugged—and you were sold to the Prince of Wales!"

"My God!" ejaculated Pauline, with a cry of terror.

"It is as true as that you have escaped his clutches," continued the Gallows' Widow. "Now, compose yourself, young lady," she added, perceiving that the maiden was trembling all over and that she still contemplated the countenances of the three intruders with a vague suspicion. "We were appointed by Lord Florimel to watch over and protect you—and we have done our duty."

"Lord Florimel!" exclaimed Pauline, a sudden glow of pleasure animating her features and bringing back the vital colouring to her cheeks that an instant before were pale as alabaster. "Is it possible? Oh! if it were——"

And she stopped suddenly short, as the idea that she was still beloved by the young nobleman and that she had perhaps treated him with harshness, awoke feelings of mingled tenderness and remorse in the depths of her soul.

"It is possible—and it is true, young lady," said the Gallows' Widow. "Lord Florimel loves you devotedly, and is cut to the quick because he declares that you have taken offence towards him without any real or just cause. He says that a fancied misconduct on his part has led to the bad opinion you formed of him: but he does not love you the less on that account. Very far from it: and, fearful that you would become the object of conspiracy and persecution in other quarters, he appointed us to discover where you lived and watch over you during his temporary absence in the country."

"Poor Gabriel!" murmured Pauline, the tears trickling down her cheeks—for she was profoundly moved by the communications thus unexpectedly made. "But who are you, my friends?—and to whom am I under such deep obligations?" she inquired, as she descended from the couch and seated herself in a chair by the side—for she still felt the oppressive influence of the narcotic she had imbibed.

"No matter who we are, young lady," responded the Gallows' Widow. "Our appearance may not be to your liking," she added, speaking rather with reference to the Kinchin-Grand and Carrotty Poll than to herself: "but we are staunch and true to Lord Florimel and yourself, at all events."

"Yes," exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand; "and what is more, the locking up of your sister was only a piece in the conspiracy against you. It was a dodge to get her out of the way, and prevent her from blabbing about the treatment she has received from the Prince. Ah! you see that we know all about it, Miss!" he cried, observing the look of astonishment that Pauline fixed upon him: "and so you can go to the mad-house and compel the rascals to let your sister out again; or else you can apply to the beak—the magistrate, I mean—and he'll deuced soon give you justice."

"Ah! now you have filled me with hope and joyfulness!" exclaimed Pauline, clasping her hands fervently. "But how can I reward you, my friends? I do not possess much money——"

"We won't take anything from you, young lady," interrupted the Gallows' Widow, her whole policy in the representations she had made to Pauline—the light in which she explained the circumstances of the maiden's deliverance—and her refusal to accept any recompense, all being based upon the certainty of receiving a handsome acknowledgment from Lord Florimel. "You will only annoy us," continued the Gallows' Widow, "if you persist in speaking of reward."

"Then I shall not do so any more," said Pauline. "But did Lord Florimel make you acquainted with the circumstances relative to my sister?" she asked, somewhat shocked and more astonished at the idea of her lover having been guilty of such indiscretion, even with a good motive in view.

"He never opened his lips upon that head, young lady," responded Lizzy Marks: "but Mr. Page's servant-girl is a spy of ours, whom we got introduced into his service that she might keep a better watch over your safety, living as you do next door."

"And Lord Florimel is in the country, you say?" observed Pauline, interrogatively. "Do you know whither he has gone?—that I may write and thank him for his kindness," she added, a blush suffusing itself over her beauteous cheeks and pouring a flood of tender lustre into her swimming eyes—her heart all the time beating rapidly and joyously at the thought that the path to reconciliation with her lover was now so completely open.

"His lordship is at Dover," returned the Gallows' Widow. "I have called two or three times within the last month at his house in Piccadilly:

because I wanted to tell him that we had discovered your residence. But he is detained, I was told on each occasion, by particular business at Dover."

"And did you not write to him?" demanded Pauline, her tone now assuming an accent of reproach.

"That is not our way of doing business, young lady," replied the Gallows' Widow. "We never commit anything to paper, unless it's absolutely necessary: and as we have been in hopes that Lord Florimel would return to town, we thought it most prudent to await his arrival. It will now be for you, Miss, to write to him at Dover."

"And is it possible," exclaimed Pauline, another thought now coming uppermost in her mind, "that Mr. and Mrs. Page, who have affected such sincere friendship and deep commiseration towards me, are the vilest and most perfidious of traitors?"

"They are indeed, Miss Clarendon," cried Carrotty Poll. "Page is nothing more than a rascally schemer—and his wife was lately a common prostitute at the East End of London."

"Great heaven!" ejaculated Pauline, shocked by this disclosure. "And I have been the companion of that woman!"

"But you did not know her, Miss," said the Gallows' Widow: "and so you can't blame yourself."

"Oh! but what will Lord Florimel think?—what will he say?" cried Pauline, recoiling more and more from the thought of the pollution with which she had been brought in contact.

"His lordship need never know who or what Mrs. Page is," observed Carrotty Poll, "unless you choose to tell him."

"I should not think of acting with any disguise or duplicity towards him," said the young maiden, firmly. "But all this does not regard you, my friends," she immediately added. "And now that I feel sufficiently recovered to quit this house of infamy and danger, I shall take my leave of you—but not without renewed thanks for your intervention in my behalf."

And the generous Pauline extended her fair hand to the Gallows' Widow, and then offered the same testimonial of her gratitude to the Kinchin-Grand and the Big Beggarman's daughter. They accompanied her down stairs; and she regained her own dwelling in safety.

The two women and the Kinchin-Grand now knocked at the door of the parlour on the ground-floor of Page's house; and they were instantaneously admitted by Shickster Sal, who held a pistol in her hand. The ex-bagman was seated moodily enough in one corner of the room, and his wife in another—their servant-girl having mounted guard over them while the preceding scenes were taking place up-stairs. On the entrance of the three intruders, all of whom were known but too well to the ex-bagman, he gave a sudden start and flung looks of mingled terror and entreaty from one to the other: but Julia appeared to remain unmoved by their presence.

"Now, old feller," exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand, as he placed himself with his back against the door and received the pistol from the hands of his paramour,—"we have got you at last."

"But you will not murder me?" said Page, rising from his seat and then sinking back again into it; for his limbs trembled as if he had been suddenly seized with an ague.

"Well, all that depends upon the way you behave yourself," responded the Kinchin-Grand. "Not that I suppose you'll drive us to extremes——"

"Then, what do you demand of me?" inquired Page, his voice as tremulous as his limbs, and a hideous alarm depicted in every lineament of his countenance.

"Listen," said the Gallows' Widow, fixing her eyes with a cold and reptile-like look upon the miserable man. "You have been our deadly enemy—and all the misfortunes which have overtaken Stephen Price and Joe Warren may be attributed to your persecution of them, and the treachery of your wife. But we were resolved to revenge ourselves: and we decided upon adopting these means to get you into our power. Your servant is our agent;—and all your proceedings are known to us. The Prince has likewise got into our clutches; and we intend to keep a firm hold upon him. Miss Pauline Clarendon has been rescued from his designs; and she will to-morrow demand and procure the release of her sister. Thus, a portion of our revenge has been to defeat all *your* schemes and treacheries. We now come to the second act in the tragedy—for a tragedy it *shall* prove in the long run," she added, with a sudden lighting-up of her usually impassible features, as she darted a glance of tigress-like ferocity towards Julia.

"A tragedy?" groaned the unhappy Mr. Page, cowering as it were beneath the dreadful menace—while his wife now began to show symptoms of uneasiness, although she said nothing.

"Yes—a tragedy," echoed the Gallows' Widow, stirred by her vindictive feelings to a pitch of excitement that was rare indeed with her. "But we have not come to that stage in the drama yet. For the present we mean to content ourselves with all your money and all your valuables. So you would do well to produce them willingly—or we shall take them by force!"

"I have but a few guineas in my purse," murmured the wretched Mr. Page. "I don't know how much Julia may have in her pocket——"

"There!—that's all!" ejaculated his wife petulantly, as she flung a purse upon the table.

"Four quid, two bulls, a half-bull, a kye-bosh, and three tanners," said the Kinchin-Grand, as he emptied the purse into the palm of Carrotty Poll's hand, and thus elegantly and classically enumerated the four sovereigns, the two crown-pieces, the half-crown, the shilling, and the three sixpenny-pieces, which formed the contents.

"Now make him open his writing-desk," exclaimed Shickster Sal, pointing contemptuously towards her master. "But stay—I'll fetch it!"—and she hurried from the room.

In a few moments she returned, bringing with her the writing-desk, which Mr. Page was compelled to open: and while the Gallows' Widow and Carrotty Poll were ransacking it, he looked on with the air and feelings of a man who is about to be hanged.

"Ah! there's the flimsies!" ejaculated the Kinchin-Grand, as Elizabeth Marks drew forth a bundle of bank-notes. "How many is there of them delicate-looking bits of paper?"

"More than a thousand pounds altogether," re-

plied the Gallows' Widow, after deliberately examining the notes: then, as she secured them in the bosom of her dress, she turned towards Shickster Sal, saying, "Where else are we to look?"

"You'll take the plate, of course?" observed this young female—and without waiting for a reply, she once more quitted the room.

"You see, Julia," exclaimed Mr. Page, wringing his hands, "that they are going to despoil us of everything we possess?"

"I see it all, sure enough," returned Julia, flinging a look of diabolical hatred upon the two women and the Kinchin-Grand.

"Then why don't you do something to prevent them?" cried the ex-bagman, without pausing to reflect upon what he said in his mingled rage and despair.

"Why don't *you*?" demanded Mrs. Page, now darting a glance of unmitigated contempt upon her husband. "I always thought you were a sneaking coward—and now I am convinced of it."

"Don't vex me, Julia—I can't bear it!" exclaimed Page. "I'm wretched and miserable enough as it is. But surely our kind friends here will have *some* mercy upon us?" he added, turning with an air of appeal towards his merciless spoliators.

"Kind friends indeed!" ejaculated Julia. "It is now a war to the knife between them and me," she muttered in a voice audible only to herself.

At this moment Shickster Sal returned to the parlour, with the plate wrapped up in an apron. This portion of the plunder was entrusted to the guardianship of the Kinchin-Grand; and Mr. Page groaned with a most ludicrous misery as he beheld his silver forks and spoons consigned to the depths of the young reprobate's pocket.

"Now their watches and rings," exclaimed Shickster Sal, exultingly. "Ah! I owe them a spite for many a harsh word and mean and stingy prying into the larder to see if I'd eaten too much."

"Your watch, ear-rings, and finger-ring," said the Kinchin-Grand, accosting Julia with the pistol in his hand.

Mrs. Page divested herself of her jewellery with a calmness that was ominous as the lull which precedes the outburst of the tempest's rage: but her husband fell upon his knees and implored that his personal decorations might be at least spared. His plunderers were however remorseless: and Mr. Page's jewellery followed his wife's trinkets into the custody of the Big Beggarman's daughter.

"Now, is there anything else worth taking?" inquired the Kinchin-Grand, who was hugely delighted with the work of spoliation.

"Not that I can recollect," answered Shickster Sal.

"This will do for the present," observed the Gallows' Widow. "And now," she continued, addressing herself to Mr. and Mrs. Page, "if you dare to attempt the slightest retaliation in any way, we shall unhesitatingly give information against you for drugging the wine that was to make Miss Clarendon the Prince's victim. She would in that case be compelled to come forward and bear testimony against you; and her evidence would be enough to transport you both for the rest of your days, if not hang you."

Mr. Page groaned once more, as if he already felt a halter tightening round his throat: but Julia affected the most complete indifference.

The Gallows' Widow, Carrotty Poll, the Kinchin-Grand, and Shickster Sal, now took their departure, two by the front door, and two by the back way, the better to escape observation;—and the ex-bagman remained alone with his wife, to deplore the immense loss which they had just sustained.

Early on the following morning they quitted their abode at Paradise Villas;—and in the course of the day a van arrived at the house which they had thus abruptly vacated, to remove their furniture to some other dwelling.

CHAPTER CXCVII.

SUICIDE OR MURDER?

It was about eleven o'clock in the forenoon, and the Earl of Desborough was seated in the library at Stamford Manor. A book lay open before him: but although his eyes remained mechanically fixed upon its pages, his thoughts were travelling away from the subject of the volume.

For he was reflecting upon the many grave and saddening incidents which had occurred in his household, alike in Berkeley Square and at Stamford Manor, within the last few months; and he felt deeply, deeply for the sorrow and the shame that had fallen upon the head of her whom he adored with so sublime a worship.

So profoundly absorbed was he in his meditations that he did not hear the door open and close again: but he was suddenly startled by feeling a hand laid gently upon his shoulder. He looked up—and he beheld his wife standing close by his chair: but he was instantaneously struck by the mingled wildness, fierce determination, and bitter hatred that were legible upon her countenance. An ominous light burnt in those eyes the glory of which was marred by the corrugation of the ebon brows: the lips, whence the rich vital colouring had almost completely fled, were closely compressed;—and her countenance wore a pallor that looked all the more ghastly in consequence of the olive tint of the complexion.

"Heavens! what—some new source of sorrow?" exclaimed the Earl, starting from his seat and gazing with an intense anxiety upon his wife.

"Say rather, some new reason for a prompt and summary vengeance!" replied Eleanor, in a low thick voice: and she gave utterance with difficulty to these words which appeared to choke her.

"Tell me what has happened—do not keep me in suspense!" cried the Earl, tortured with the cruellest apprehensions.

"That villain demands another interview with me," answered the Countess, her eyes flashing brighter fires than the brightest eyes of woman had ever before shot forth, and her whole form quivering with terrible feelings.

"The miscreant!" ejaculated the Earl, clenching his fingers with such spasmodic violence that the nails made deep indentations in the palms of his hands. "But by what means has he conveyed this request?"

"Request!" echoed the Countess, with an indescribable bitterness: "'tis a command—an imperious command! The villain has had the audacity

to send me a letter, declaring that he insists upon seeing me this evening at nine o'clock——"

"Ah! dares the Prince make another attempt?" cried the Earl, his own countenance becoming pale with rage and his lips growing ashy and quivering.

"No, no—'tis not for *that!*" exclaimed Eleanor. "The man whose name I cannot mention, has received his pardon through the intervention of the Prince; and he therefore defies *you* and persecutes *me*."

"But why does he demand this interview?" cried the Earl. "Does he not know enough of you to be convinced that you would prefer death, rather than yield again——"

"O God! do not allude to my past frailty, Francis!" exclaimed the Countess wildly. "You will drive me mad! But pardon this excitement," she immediately added, in a gentler tone, as she took her husband's hand and pressed it to her lips. "No—the villain does not desecrate the name of love by addressing me in such terms or with such a hope. But he demands money—and he orders me—yes, *orders* me—to meet him this night at nine o'clock with five thousand pounds, as the only condition on which he swears to leave me unmolested for the future."

"The sum is nothing, Eleanor," said the nobleman in a musing tone: "but the man's oath——"

"Is valueless," added the unfortunate lady, with a bitter emphasis. "Besides, the excitement is killing me! I cannot live in the constant terror of receiving some new proof of this man's fiendish villany or heartless extortion. The dread of his persecution would poison all the little happiness that remains to me in this life: my thoughts by day and my dreams by night would be filled with images of horror conjured up by the knowledge that there existed in the world *one* individual who could blast my reputation in a moment. Such an existence would be a perpetual torture—a prolonged excruciation — an endless series of maddening agonies. No—no: I cannot endure it, Francis;—and either——"

"Speak, Eleanor," said the Earl, trembling with apprehension beneath the look of awful gloom and sombre determination which settled itself upon his wife's countenance as she suddenly stopped short in her observations. "You were saying that either ——"

"Either that man or myself must die!" answered the Countess, in a deep voice: and there was a ferocious glare in her eyes, which showed how terrible were the thoughts that the cruellest combination of circumstances had excited in the mind of a woman naturally so generous-hearted and so magnanimous.

"Holy God! what mean you, Eleanor?" demanded the Earl, grasping her wrist with convulsive violence and gazing with horrified looks into the depths of those eyes wherein an ominous light was burning.

"I mean," she answered, with the measured accents of despair, "that you must now choose between two appalling alternatives! I mean," she continued, with the emphasis of stern resolution, "that you have now to make up your mind whether you shall follow to the grave the corpse of a suicide wife—or whether that wife shall live, but with the brand of a murderess upon her brow!"

"Just heaven! has it come to this, Eleanor?" exclaimed the nobleman, trembling from head to foot, as if struck with a palsy.

"I have told you the alternatives," she replied, with the awful coldness of despair. "That villain and myself cannot continue to breathe the same air. So long as he encumbers this world with his presence, he may cross my path at any moment;—and I repeat that I could not live in the constant excitement of such an apprehension. No—either he or I must perish! A crime will have to be committed by *my* hand: and it is for *you* to decide whether that crime shall be suicide or murder. To me it is a matter of indifference: for I have resolved to escape either from *his* persecution or else from life!"

"Oh! you distress me beyond all measure, my worshipped—my adored—my well-beloved Eleanor!" exclaimed the unhappy Earl, sinking down upon his knees at her feet, and moistening her hands with his tears as he pressed them with frenzied violence to his lips. "For God's sake, my darling Eleanor, re-consider this dreadful affair! Remember, that if you decide upon ridding your path of that enemy, no subsequent remorse can recall the deed—no after-compunction undo the act! Besides, my love—my angel—my afflicted one, it must not be *you* who will do this—but I—your husband: and will you make me a murderer?"

"No—not for worlds, Francis!" exclaimed the wretched lady, compelling him to rise from his suppliant posture and then throwing herself into his arms.

"Oh! you will re-consider the matter, my beloved?" he cried, straining her to his breast and covering her countenance with kisses and with tears.

"Alas! there is nothing to re-consider—my mind is made up!" she said, gently disengaging herself from her husband's embrace. "But I will not permit you to perpetrate a crime, Francis—you who have never committed a foul deed in all your life!"

"Yes—when I led you as a victim to the altar," said the Earl, in a low deep tone of indescribable self-reproach.

"Ah! we will not talk of *that* now, my husband!" exclaimed the Countess. "You must consent to yield to those imperious circumstances which have environed me as with a wall of adamant,—circumstances which are rapidly closing in around me, and which will crush me to death unless I clear myself a means of egress by one desperate and decisive blow. Listen to what Ramsey stipulates—or rather, what he commands! He tells me that to-night at nine o'clock I am to meet him in the open field behind the shrubbery—that I am to bring with me the sum of five thousand pounds in notes, gold, or other monies equally available—that I must proceed *alone* to the place of appointment—and that if I refuse to yield to these conditions, he will publish the history of his amour with me,—yes, publish everything, and thereby gain by the sale of so extraordinary a narrative a sum equal to, if not larger than, that amount which he has demanded as the price of his secrecy!"

"He has dared to write all this?" exclaimed the Earl, still trembling with rage and terror.

"Nay—read for yourself!" cried the Countess: and drawing forth a letter from her bosom, she

gave it to Lord Desborough, who hurriedly perused the contents. "Now are you satisfied, Francis?" she asked: and taking back the note, she deliberately lighted a taper and burnt it.

"I did not doubt your word, Eleanor," said the Earl: "but I was astonished at the villany—the matchless villany—of this wretch who seeks to turn into a source of gain and profit the immeasurable injury which he has inflicted upon you. Oh! my dear wife, this is an affair which must be left to me—this is a matter which I alone can settle! And depend upon it that the reckoning shall be terrible——"

"Once more, Francis—and let it be for the last time—I tell you that the affair is *mine*, and I alone can settle it!" interrupted the Countess, her voice, her manner, and her looks, all denoting an irrevocable decision. "Decide then, my dear husband—decide: which shall my doom be—that of a self-destroyer or of an assassin?"

"Great God! we must not have recourse to such shocking expedients!" exclaimed the nobleman, shuddering to the innermost recesses of his being. "Let us yield to the wretch's extortion—let us comply with his demands—and let us live on in the hope that his persecution of *you* has indeed ended. But should he again seek to molest you, Eleanor, then—oh! then, I will urge not a syllable against any course which you may decide upon adopting."

"No reliance is to be placed upon that man," said the Countess, in a voice which showed that her resolution was unalterable. "The same diabolical spirit which urges him to practise extortions now, will only be sharpened and not appeased, strengthened and not satiated, by our concession. If we yield to-day, we may expect further demonstrations of his power to-morrow: if we show ourselves weak and timorous, he will become proportionately bold and merciless in his demands. No—we must put an end to this state of things, which I at least can endure no longer. There was a time—but a short while ago—when I should have shrunk in dismay from the thought of suicide, and in horror from that of murder. But now, so desperate have grown the circumstances of my position, I can contemplate them both with calmness. Do not you, therefore, discourage me, my husband: but rather inspire me with firmness, if any be wanting on my part, to perform one of those deeds either of which has become a duty. Yes—and whatever be your decision, you will screen me! If your judgment be self-destruction for me—if you would rather lose your wife altogether, than let her live as a murderess—you will not allow the world to know that I took poison. But if, on the other hand, you decide that I shall live——"

"My God! my God! you are driving me mad, Eleanor!" exclaimed the wretched nobleman, as he pressed his hand forcibly to his throbbing brows and leant against the mantel-piece for support. "Do not talk thus dreadfully—do not abandon yourself to the fearful thoughts which are whirling you along with their eddies."

"Oh! you must be calm—you must be calm, Francis!" cried the lady, taking his hand and pressing it to her bosom. "Those wild and passionate ejaculations on your part—those entreaties so unavailing in the face of my unalterable resolve—those earnest prayers and anguished cries, only add bitterness to a scene which is already a crucifixion of us both! Come—be bold—be firm—be courageous, my dear husband; and prepare to give that decision which now alone is wanting to direct me in one path or the other."

"And are you thus determined, Eleanor?" asked the unhappy nobleman, scarcely able to believe in the frightful truth which was now present to his contemplation.

"I take heaven to witness that my resolve is unalterable—my mind unchangeable!" answered the Countess, in a solemn tone. "There—feel my hand: does it tremble? No. And my heart palpitates with violence no longer. I am calm—I am tranquil—I am even happy in the certitude of being released, by one means or another, from an intolerable tyranny. And remember, my dear husband, that if you doom me by your decision to suicide, you will yet remain alive to endure that persecution whence I shall have escaped by the avenue of self-destruction."

"No—no—my Eleanor—my loved one," exclaimed the Earl of Desborough, whose feelings were harrowed to a frightful degree of poignancy,—"you shall not die! What, you—so young—so beautiful—so full of all the freshness of youth and the vigour of health,—*you* to die so soon—*you* to perish thus early—and by thine own hand,——Oh! no—it must not be! You shall live, my worshipped Eleanor—live to triumph over this enemy of thine;—and since I see that thou art resolute, Eleanor, I will take courage from thy determination—I will acquire firmness from thy equanimity. Live, then, my Eleanor:—live!" repeated the Earl, with a sort of enthusiastic devotion to the very crime which had horrified him a few instants before: "live, I say—and let thine enemy—thy fierce, merciless, diabolical enemy perish as he deserves!"

"Oh! now thou art deserving of all my love!" exclaimed the Countess, throwing herself into the arms of her husband.

CHAPTER CXCVIII.

THE LAST MEETING.

SINCE his return to England Tim Meagles had removed his horses from Lady Lade's stables to the mews where he had always been wont to keep them prior to his temporary expatriation: for the Amazon, faithful to her determination of leading a prudential life during the period of her mourning, was unwilling that any circumstance should seem to indicate the renewal of a too familiar connexion with Meagles. Hence the removal of his stud back to the mews where he had been wont to contract for their keep.

The proprietor of that stabling establishment was in the habit of letting out post-chaises and vehicles of all kinds;—and it happened that about three o'clock in the afternoon of the same day on which the scene in the preceding chapter occurred at Stamford Manor, a gentleman entered the mews and ordered a post-chaise to be got ready to take him to Aylesbury.

Now, at this particular moment Tim Meagles was in the stable where his own horses were kept; and he overheard the instructions just given by the gentleman. The voice instantaneously struck him as being that of Philip Ramsey; and the sus-

picion appeared to receive confirmation from the fact that the individual was about to visit the neighbourhood of Stamford Manor. Ascending to a loft which had a window overlooking the stable-yard, Meagles was enabled to obtain a view of the person whose proceedings had thus suddenly interested him; and he found, as he had suspected, that it was none other than the resuscitated criminal.

"Ah! the Prince is doubtless at his tricks again," thought Meagles within himself: "or else this fellow is intent upon persecuting the poor Countess in order to serve some private aim of his own. In either case it behoves me to watch his movements. If he is still employed by the Prince, it will afford me the greatest pleasure to thwart his plans; and if he is acting on his own account, I am in a measure bound by the Earl's generosity towards me, to detect and expose the covert treachery. No, no, Mr. Ramsey!—you shan't carry on this odious game any longer, if I can put a stop to it. I suppose you have got your pardon safe in your pocket;—or else you would not venture abroad in this undisguised manner during the broad daylight. But, by Jove! 'tis almost a pity that you weren't suffered to go back to the gallows, which has assuredly been cheated of a most fit and proper subject for its operations. However, I will put a spoke in your wheel ere long, if you do mean to persecute that unfortunate lady and her noble husband."

Thus musing, Tim Meagles watched from the window of the loft until the post-chaise was got ready. Ramsey stepped into it: the postilion received his instructions;—and the vehicle then rolled out of the stable-yard.

Descending from the loft, Tim ordered his horse to be saddled immediately; and mounting the noble animal, he set off in pursuit of the post-chaise. About a mile beyond the suburbs he came within sight of it; and he continued to follow it at such a distance that he stood no chance of being observed by Ramsey, should this individual look forth from the windows of the vehicle.

Aylesbury is forty miles from London; and as the weather was remarkably fine on the day of which we are writing, the roads were good. The chaise accordingly travelled at the rate of about ten miles an hour:—and it was a little after seven in the evening when it arrived in the close vicinage of Aylesbury. But Ramsey had no inclination to enter a town where he was so well known,—although, as Meagles surmised, he *had* his pardon in his pocket. He accordingly directed the postilion to turn into a bye-road leading in the direction of Stamford Manor; and the chaise ultimately stopped at the very same way-side public-house where Meagles had put up on the memorable night of his intervention on behalf of the Countess of Desborough.

That Philip Ramsey's designs bore reference to the inmates of the Manor, Tim Meagles was now convinced—even if he had previously entertained any doubt upon the subject;—and his first impulse was to repair straight to that mansion, and warn the Earl of Desborough of the presence of the enemy. But a second thought showed him the imprudence of losing sight of an individual of whose aims and purposes he was still so far ignorant as to render it desirable that he should dog him step by step: and Meagles accordingly resolved to continue watching the movements of the resuscitated criminal. Fortunately for his purpose, a lad connected with the public-house passed along the road while Meagles was thus deliberating within himself;—and the liberality with which Tim had remunerated the dependants of the little inn on the former occasion of his visit to the neighbourhood, had made a sufficient impression upon the boy's mind to lead him now to the immediate recognition of so bounteous a patron. He accordingly touched his cap by way of salutation, and inquired whether Meagles was going to stop at the inn.

"Yes," answered Tim. "But I have come down here on business of a very private nature; and I want to speak to the landlord before I approach any nearer to his house, as he has got a very suspicious character there. Now, my lad, do you go on as quick as you can; and without saying anything to alarm the inmates of the place, tell the landlord to come to me directly. I shall wait here in the lane."

With these words, Meagles tossed a crown-piece to the lad, who hastened away to execute the commission entrusted to him. In about ten minutes the landlord made his appearance, with a somewhat elongated countenance: for the message which the lad had whispered in his ear was not of a very reassuring character.

"My good fellow," said Meagles, leaping from his horse, "you need not be alarmed—as I am here on purpose to prevent mischief. In fact, I am a Bow Street officer in disguise; and I am watching the individual who has just alighted from a post-chaise at your house."

"What! is such a respectable-looking gentleman a bad character in reality?" inquired the landlord.

"He is indeed," returned Meagles. "Did you never see him before?"

"Never, to my knowledge," was the reply. "Who is he, sir?"

"That does not matter now," rejoined Tim. "You may perhaps learn by and bye. But what is he doing now?"

"He engaged the private parlour and ordered some dinner to be got ready as soon as possible," said the landlord.

"And is he in the parlour now?" demanded Meagles.

"Yes, sir. He inquired if we'd got anything to read; and I sent him in some old books. I suppose that if he's a house-breaker or what not, he'll remain snug in-doors until night-time?"

"That will be his game precisely," answered Tim. "And now you must lead my horse to the stable, while I get round by the back way into the house; and there you must let me have a room which will enable me to keep a strict watch upon the movements of the rascal. But mind and do not breathe a word that will create any alarm in the place or lead the fellow to suspect that he is being dogged."

"I understand you, sir," replied the landlord. "If you go round by the field, you can enter the house without being obliged to pass the windows of the room where the vagabond is sitting: and I shall be ready to lead you to a chamber adjoining the parlour."

These arrangements were accordingly carried into effect;—and a good dinner was served up to Meagles, who was prepared to do ample justice to it after his long ride.

At about a quarter to nine o'clock, the landlord stole softly into the chamber to inform Meagles that the suspicious customer had ordered the horses to be put to the chaise at ten o'clock, and that he had stated his intention to step across to Stamford Manor in the interval. Accordingly, the landlord watched until Ramsey sallied forth, which he did in a few minutes;—and Meagles lost no time in following him.

It was a beautiful moon-lit evening: but the road was bordered by a high hedge on one side; and, favoured by the deep shade thereof, Meagles was enabled to pursue the criminal without being perceived. Stamford Manor was in the immediate neighbourhood: but instead of entering the enclosure for the purpose of seeking the front door, Ramsey struck into a narrow lane leading to the fields behind the garden and shrubbery. Thither did Meagles follow him, still contriving to escape observation;—and when the resuscitated criminal entered the meadow where he had desired Lady Desborough to meet him, the wary Tim concealed himself behind a large tree. For by the way in which Ramsey paused and looked anxiously around, Meagles judged that he had an appointment with some one in that particular place.

Nor was our astute friend mistaken: for in a few minutes a lady, enveloped in a cloak, issued from the shrubbery and advanced towards the spot where Philip Ramsey had posted himself. By the stature and gait of the lady, Meagles had little difficulty in at once recognising the Countess of Desborough;—but if he had entertained any uncertainty upon that score, the doubt was speedily

dissolved when the rays of the moon streamed full upon her countenance as she cast a rapid and searching look around.

Ramsey suffered her to advance almost as far as the spot where he was standing, ere he moved a step forward to encounter her: his aim was evidently to assure himself that she had come *alone*. Accordingly, when he found that no person was following her at a distance, and when his listening ear caught the sound of no footstep besides her own gentle tread upon the dewy sward, he advanced a few paces to meet her. Then, by the light of the silver moon that was filling the atmosphere with so sweet and pure a lustre, did the looks of that vile man encounter those of that desperate woman;—and each recoiled from the other with a simultaneous shuddering, because the man felt that he was playing the part of a despicable coward, and to the woman it already seemed as if the murder-mark of blood were upon her brow!

"Let our interview be short and the business speedily concluded," said Ramsey, with the abruptness of one who can find no apologetic preface wherewith to open the conversation.

"I shall not detain you many minutes, sir," replied the Countess, in a cold and measured voice, although the palpitations of her heart were nervously quick and short. "But before I yield to the extortionate demand which you have made upon me——"

"Ah! then you mean to comply with my request—and you will act wisely!" interrupted Ramsey: then, as the looks quailed beneath the flashing eyes of the noble lady whose countenance was ghastly pale, he said, "I know—I feel that I am playing a villanous part; but I have resolved to make war upon the world and spare me not. To a man placed in such fearful circumstances as those which belong to my history, there is but one source of comfort and solace—and that is money! By the aid of gold I may surround myself with all the luxuries, the elegancies, and the enjoyments of life, and thereby form a barrier against the too frequent intrusion of overwhelming reminiscences. Gold, then, is now the deity of my adoration—the idol of my worship. Wherever I can obtain it by fair means or by foul, I will joyously welcome its presence. And not from you alone, Countess of Desborough, shall I extort the glittering ore: but even upon higher personages still must the tribute be levied. Yes—I hold the means of enforcing all this——"

"And you have chosen to commence with me?" exclaimed Eleanor, cutting short that long tirade which the wretch was delivering in a vein of malignant triumph. "Well, be it so!" she added, resuming that cold and measured tone which afforded not the slightest clue to the real nature of the thoughts that were agitating in her bosom. "The amount you have demanded of me shall be placed at your disposal. But before we separate, I must so far relieve the intolerable bitterness of those feelings which I entertain towards you by proclaiming, Philip Ramsey, that madly—profoundly—devotedly as I once loved you, so fiercely and intensely do I now hate you!"

And the words came hissing snake-like from between the lips that were ashy and quivering—and the splendid eyes of the Countess darted forth fires at the same moment.

"Enough of this!" cried Ramsey, in an insolent tone of authority. "I came not hither to be taunted nor reviled: beware, lady, how I may become the reviler!"

"Ah! I see that it is time to put an end to our interview!" ejaculated the Countess, her right arm moving beneath the cloak which wrapped her form.

"Give me the money, and let me take my departure," said the criminal, greedily anxious to clutch the fruits of his extortion.

"I have brought it in a bag—gold and bank-notes all mixed together," continued Eleanor: "but by the light of the moon you can assure yourself that the sum is correct."

"I will take your word for it," rejoined Ramsey, extending his hand to receive the hoped-for treasure. "Give me the bag!"

"The reward of your vile treachery towards me!" exclaimed the Countess, in a tone of bitter inquiry.

"Term it what you will," cried Ramsey, impatiently. "Call it *reward* if you like—only give it quick——"

"Then take it!" ejaculated Eleanor, abruptly stretching forth her right arm from beneath the cloak: and the sudden movement was followed, rapidly as the eye winks, by the report of a pistol.

A short quick cry burst from Ramsey's lips—and the next instant, while that death-sound was yet piercing the air, he threw up his arms and fell down dead!

The murderess turned and fled precipitately towards the shrubbery whence she had emerged a few minutes before; and Meagles, stupified with a horrible consternation, remained transfixed to the spot where he had concealed himself behind a tree.

CHAPTER CXCIX.

AFTER THE MURDER.

SUDDENLY a wild and fearful light flamed up in the mind of Tim Meagles, showing him at a glance all the perils which, in a single moment as it were, had sprung into existence around him. He had followed Ramsey from London—he had watched him at the adjacent public-house—and he had dogged him to that field where the tragedy had just taken place. The corpse of the murdered man would be discovered; and he (Meagles) would be pointed out by an overwhelming combination of circumstantial evidence as the author of the crime!

Roused from his stupor by these harrowing reflections which traversed his brain with the vividness and speed of lightning, Meagles darted in pursuit of Lady Desborough. She was just on the point of entering the shrubbery, when the sounds of those quick steps behind, smote like a death-knell upon her ears; and she clung, panting with terror and trembling all over, to the gate of the enclosure.

"Almighty God! what have you done, miserable woman?" demanded Meagles, clutching her violently by the shoulder.

The voice was familiar to the Countess;—and turning round with a spasmodic start, she instantaneously recognised her deliverer of the other night.

"Oh! Mr. Meagles, you will not betray me?" she cried, a gleam of hope appearing upon the countenance that an instant before was convulsed with indescribable terror.

But before Meagles had time to utter a word in response to that appeal, a rustling amidst the evergreens of the shrubbery was heard, and the form of a man sprang forth.

"Ah! it is you, Francis!" ejaculated the Countess of Desborough, as the moonlight fell upon the features of her husband.

"Yes — I followed you, Eleanor, thus far on your path of vengeance and of daring," replied the Earl, in a voice that was thick and hoarse;—"and I remained close at hand to protect you in the event of a struggle with your enemy."

"And that enemy — he is no more!" said the Countess, in a low, deep, and solemn tone. "But you, Mr. Meagles—how came you here?" she demanded, turning abruptly towards that individual.

"My object was of a friendly nature towards you, unhappy lady," replied Tim, on whose countenance were yet depicted the traces of that horror with which the shocking deed had inspired him. "Suffice it to say that I accidentally learnt Ramsey's intention to pay this neighbourhood a visit to-night: and believing his object to bode no good to you, I followed him all the way from London and watched him hither. But would to God that I had attended to my own business instead!" he added bitterly.

"Mr. Meagles," said the Earl, taking Tim's hand and pressing it forcibly, "you must not betray this frightful secret! That villain has only met his righteous doom. Alas! you are not ignorant of the fatal power which he exercised over my unhappy wife—you are acquainted with the tremendous secret of that influence! Know, then, in addition, that the miscreant's last act of despotism was the endeavour to extort a large sum of money as the price of his silence: and my wife, unable to endure that continued persecution——"

"God knows that there is extenuation enough for this crime!" ejaculated Meagles. "But terrible dangers now environ me!"—and he hastily explained the nature of his position, as we have already detailed it at the opening of this chapter.

"Then what is to be done?—what would you advise?" asked the Earl, trembling from head to foot.

"Oh! do not imagine that punishment shall be allowed to overtake the innocent, Mr. Meagles!" exclaimed the Countess of Desborough, with a sudden presence of mind and a moral courage that sprang from a heroic resolution to dare and suffer all the consequences of her crime. "I have not been bold only to perpetrate the deed: but I will continue bold to avow it!"

"No—never, never!" groaned the unhappy Earl, wringing his hands despairingly.

"And I say *never, never* also!" exclaimed Meagles, who, in spite of his horror at the deed which she had just committed, could not help admiring the Countess for her resolution to screen the innocent and suffer all the consequences of her turpitude. "We must remove every trace of the fearful tragedy," he added; "and leave the rest to chance. Does your lordship feel equal to the task of assisting me to bury that corpse?'—and his voice sank to a low whisper, which seem mingle ominously with the rustling leaves.

"Yes—I will assist you," returned the man, scarcely appearing to be aware of wh was saying or doing.

"Then your ladyship will hasten in-doors served Meagles, "and assure yourself tha night's proceedings have passed unnoticed a suspected."

"Let the Earl go home," said the Countes will remain here and assist you in conceali traces of my own work."

"No, no!" ejaculated Meagles, impat "Your absence will be remarked—whereas t the Earl will excite no particular attention as I say, madam—or I wash my hands o business."

"You shall be obeyed, Mr. Meagles," sai Countess: then, grasping his hand and str it with force, she whispered, "My honour safety—my life, are now in your keeping——

"And they are safe with me!" was the s and impressive rejoinder.

As the moonbeams fell fully on the pa upturned countenance of Lady Desborough, gles saw that she fixed upon him a look of in gratitude;—and he experienced a cruel shoc a poignant pang at the thought that so splen creature had perpetrated such a crime!

"Now, my lord," he hastened to exclaim, turned towards the Earl, "you must lose no in procuring a spade, while I will understa drag the corpse from the spot where it is lying to this shrubbery—and *there* will we bur

The Countess took her husband's arm an him rapidly away towards the mansion,—Meagles, after throwing a look of piercing scru around to assure himself as far as he was able the coast was clear, advanced towards the where the corpse lay.

Naturally courageous and undaunted th he were, he could not help shuddering as he proached the inanimate form that lay upon dewy sward;—and a sickening sensation took session of him, as his looks fell upon the pal blood-stained countenance of the dead. Fo contents of the pistol had penetrated the bra the victim; and the forehead seemed sm shattered.

But that feeling of mingled terror and sh of the heart was only transitory;—and, with other searching glance thrown around the Tim Meagles began to drag the corpse toward shrubbery. This portion of the task was soo complished; and, having opened the gate, Me drew the body inside the enclosure.

The Earl of Desborough had not as yet a peared;—and it suddenly struck Meagles there might be some papers or letters of sequence about the person of the murdered He accordingly stooped down and examine pockets. A packet of documents, tied wi piece of tape, was the fruit of this search;-Meagles unhesitatingly took possession the But neither the purse nor the watch of the dece did he touch: had Ramsey's pocket been lined precious stones, Meagles would have shrun loathing and scorn from the idea of self-appro ing a single one of such gems.

Almost immediately after he had taken po

sion of the packet of papers, the sounds of approaching footsteps reached his ears;—and the Earl returned, bearing a spade and mattock. The nobleman's countenance, as the moonbeams fell upon it, was ghastly pale;—and there was a vacant wildness in his looks which showed how terrible an impression the tragedy of the evening had made upon his mind.

"My lord," said Meagles, in an earnest tone, "you must summon all your courage to your aid. Remember that an incautious word, uttered in the presence of a domestic or a friend, may send your wife to the scaffold!"

"Holy God! it is but too true!" ejaculated the nobleman, as if startled by the warning into all the poignancy of harrowing convictions. "Let us hasten and perform our dreadful task!"

"Does your lordship think that we are secure against observation?" inquired Meagles. "Will none of your lordship's dependants pass in this direction — to lock the gate, or see that all is safe——"

"No—this gate is never locked," returned the Earl. "Let us lose no time in hollowing a grave for the wretch who is no more," he added, with feverish impatience.

A spot amidst the evergreens was chosen—and Meagles fell to work. The nobleman, inspired with an intense anxiety to remove all traces of the crime from *above* the earth, rendered effectual assistance;—and in somewhat less than an hour a pit was dug of a sufficient depth for the required purpose. The corpse was then placed therein—the mould was shovelled back—the superfluous soil was scattered over the ground in the vicinity—and the unblest obsequies of the murdered man were concluded.

The Earl of Desborough now seemed to breathe easily for the first time since the enactment of the fatal tragedy in which his wife played the part of heroine. He invited Meagles to enter the Manor and take some refreshment after the toils of the last hour: but Tim had an insuperable repugnance to remain longer than was necessary with the Earl —for the words which the nobleman uttered when he joined the Countess at the shrubbery gate, had clearly indicated his complicity in the deed. In plain terms Meagles saw that the Earl was an accessory before the fact;—and, great though the provocation had been, he could not regard the noble couple in any other light than a murderer and a murderess. He accordingly took a hasty leave of Lord Desborough, and retraced his steps to the public-house.

It was now past eleven o'clock—and Meagles found the landlord anxiously awaiting his return. But Tim was already prepared how to act: and, immediately on entering the tavern, he exclaimed, "Well, is that fellow come back?"

"No, sir," was the landlord's reply. "What has happened?"

"I suppose he has smelt a rat and bolted," returned Meagles. "I followed him for a considerable distance: but he evidently saw that I was watching him——"

"Ah! then I am swindled out of the dinner and the wine which he had!" interrupted the landlord, in a tone of vexation. "He will never come back —that's quite sure!"

"You may put his expenses down in my bill," said Meagles, in an off-hand manner,—"since it was I who frightened the rascal away from your house. And now give me a glass of brandy-and-water; and then show me to my bed-room—for I shall sleep here to-night."

These orders were duly complied with;—and the moment Tim Meagles was alone in the chamber to which he had been conducted, he fastened the door and sate down at the table to examine the packet of papers which he had taken from the person of the murdered man.

But how great was his joy and how indescribable his astonishment, when on the outside letter of the bundle he beheld these words:—

Correspondence between Miss Hannah Lightfoot and Lady Stamford: together with Important Memoranda and Explanatory Comments. In the years 1757—1758.

"By Jove! this promises to be a lucky windfall for me!" said Meagles to himself, as with nervous impatience he unfastened the tape which encircled the packet: and his hands trembled so from acute suspense, that he dropped several of the papers upon the floor.

But speedily picking them up again, he addressed himself to the examination of their contents: and in a very few minutes he was involved in the study of the most thrilling, exciting, and interesting correspondence and memoranda that ever engaged his attention.

And through what varied transitions of feeling did his mind pass, as he plunged deeper and deeper into those documents! Now he was absorbed by the most touching pathos—then excited by the most frenzied words of despair: now he was enthralled by fervid appeals—then startled by the wildest ravings of grief. Such were the contents of the *letters*. But presently he found that the *Important Memoranda* were leading him on to the discovery of secrets of a stupendous character, —secrets intimately regarding the King of England, —yes, secrets which bore the closest reference to the honour, character, and position of George III!

With increasing wonder and interest, did Meagles turn to the *Explanatory Comments*: and from them he gleaned a full and complete solution of the mystery for the development of which the *Memoranda* had already prepared him.

Unable to restrain his amazement at the tremendous secret which he had thus discovered, and still less competent to bridle the joy which he felt at having become its depositary, Meagles sprang from his seat;—and the dread tragedy of the evening being as completely banished from his mind as if it had never occurred, he paced the room in a perfect transport of wild and ecstatic feelings. For the papers which he had formerly possessed, and which the Prince of Wales had obtained back again from the Amazon, were but "cakes and gingerbread," to use Sancho Panza's remark, compared with the correspondence and memoranda which had now fallen into his hands, and which so closely concerned the King of England.

In a word, Meagles gave way to all the extremes of an extravagant joy;—until, gradually cooling and growing collected, he began to recollect that it was far advanced into the night and that he proposed to rise early to return to town. He accordingly went to bed: but some time elapsed ere he could

compose himself to sleep;—and then his dreams were filled with images of murdered men—stark corpses—and deep graves, all curiously and fantastically blending with scenes in which George III—a beautiful Quakeress—an infant child—and various other persons or ideas connected with the important documents, were strangely jumbled. It was therefore a relief when he was awakened by the light of morning streaming into his chamber;—and, starting from the couch, he achieved his toilette with all possible despatch.

Breakfast being disposed of and the bill paid with liberality, Tim Meagles mounted his horse and began to retrace his way to London.

CHAPTER CC.

ANOTHER INTERVIEW WITH THE KING.

In the afternoon of the same day on which Mr. Timothy Meagles thus returned to the metropolis, the King and Queen held a grand levee and drawing-room at St. James's Palace. The farce of a parcel of titled fools and vain or silly women decking themselves out in all their splendour for the purpose of attending the royal raree-show, was duly performed;—and the disgusting display of pomp and ostentation stood forth in striking contrast with the soul-destroying and body-crushing miseries endured by the toiling millions throughout the length and breadth of the land.

That dreadful King, George III, in comparison with whom Nero was an angel and Caligula a saint,—and that snuffy termagaunt, Queen Charlotte, thus received the homage of the vile sycophants and the titled demireps who paid those miserable specimens of fallen humanity a worship which they had not religion enough to offer up to their Maker. The saloons of St. James's were rich, and dazzling, and brilliant with the plunder of the poor man: the produce of *his* labour was there—while he himself was starving and in rags;—and yet that execrable King and that hateful Queen bestowed not a thought upon the suffering millions over whom they ruled.

The trumpery proceedings of the levee and drawing-room took place in the usual manner,—proceedings which were more contemptible than child's-play, without the innocence of the latter: for the effect of such pompous parade and gorgeous ostentation was inevitably calculated to puff up the principal actors with an intolerable pride, and confirm them in their course of tyranny, oppression, and extravagance. But at five o'clock the whole tom-foolery was over; and while the Queen retired to her toilette-chamber to put off her robes, the King withdrew to an apartment denominated the Royal Closet, where he was in the habit of granting private audiences after the more ceremonial levee.

Scarcely had the King thus retired to that room, when a page entered to announce that a gentleman and lady, who had delivered their cards, solicited an interview in the most private manner possible. The King took the cards and started visibly when he read the name of "Mr. Meagles" upon the first: then, examining the other, he was almost inclined to fly into a rage when he beheld the name of "Lady Lade." He was about to refuse the audience solicited by those persons: but recollecting how vitally important to himself had been the object of their former visit, when he was staying at Windsor Castle, and trembling with apprehension lest some new incident had supplied them the means of coercing him at pleasure, he resolved upon seeing them.

The page was accordingly instructed to lead them by a private passage to the Royal Closet;—and in a few minutes Tim Meagles and Lady Lade once more stood in the presence of George III.

For this occasion our friend Tim had habited himself in a complete suit of black; and the riding-whip was dispensed with. Lady Lade wore her widows' weeds;—and truly handsome did she appear.

The King motioned the page to withdraw;—and so soon as he was alone with his visitors, he said in a petulant manner, where nervous suspense mingled with irritation, "Well, what is it now—what is it now?"

"May it please your Majesty," returned Meagles, "we have sought your Majesty's presence on business of the utmost importance——"

"And why did you bring *her* with you?—why did you bring *her*?" demanded the King, pointing angrily towards Letitia. "You told me last time that she was your wife—yes—your wife—Mrs. Meagles—Meagles. But it was all false—all false. George—I mean his Royal Highness—let me into the secret afterwards. He was tipsy one night—one night—I mean he was communicative one night—very communicative,—and he told me who the pretended Mrs. Meagles was. How dare you, sir—how dare you—dare you—bring that woman to me?"

"As a witness to see fair play, your Majesty," answered Meagles, with an undaunted firmness. "I have been so scurvily treated on a special occasion by your Majesty's eldest son, and the Home Office plays such queer tricks at times, that I resolved to bring a witness with me. And as the business is of a most private and confidential character, I thought your Majesty would be better pleased if I brought a friend who knows all my secrets, rather than a stranger."

"Ah! fine talk—fine talk!" ejaculated the King, in that jerking manner which was peculiar to him: then, as he surveyed the Amazon from head to foot, he said in a musing tone, "Well, upon my word, she looks as well—yes, quite as well—quite as well, in those widows' weeds as in the male apparel: quite as well! A fine woman—a very fine woman. Pity she's no better than she should be—no better than she should be," he added, these last words being inaudible alike to Meagles and the object of the monarch's musings. "And now what's the business—what's the business?" he demanded aloud, turning abruptly at the same time towards Meagles.

"Accident has thrown in my way certain important papers which intimately regard your Majesty," was the reply, delivered in a firm and measured tone.

"Papers—important papers!—what papers?" ejaculated the King, growing more and more nervous. "This is the second time you've come to me about papers. More exactions—eh! More nonsense to bother your sovereign about—eh?

Come, sir — what are these papers? Come — speak!"

"Correspondence, may it please your Majesty—memoranda—and explanatory remarks relative to a certain lady whose name cannot do otherwise than awaken disagreeable reminiscences in the mind of your Majesty:"—and as Meagles thus spoke, his looks quailed not beneath those which the monarch fixed intently upon him.

"Ah! you always harp on the same string—same string!" cried his Majesty, the colour coming and going in rapid transitions on his puffy cheeks, and his whole manner exhibiting a painful nervousness. "What papers have you got, sir? They are all forgeries—all forgeries—and I defy you. Go about your business—about your business:"—and the King, turning abruptly away from Meagles and the Amazon, walked to the farther end of the room.

"Hear me, sire!" exclaimed Tim, raising his voice with firmness and decision. "I am incapable of committing the crime which your Majesty dares impute to me: I am no forger — no, not half so much as your Majesty is a foul perjurer."

"Eh! what?—this to me? this to me?" cried George III, turning rapidly round and stamping his foot with rage, while his countenance became purple. "By heaven, sir, if you wish to sleep in the Tower——"

"No: your Majesty dares not wreak your vengeance upon me *now*!" interrupted the undaunted Tim.

"Mention the name of Miss Hannah Lightfoot at once," exclaimed the Amazon,—"and thereby afford his Majesty a clue to the purport of our business."

"Ah! that name—no—no—don't mention it—don't mention it, good people!" gasped the King, staggering back as if beneath the weight of a blow. "Come—let us talk quietly and tranquilly—without excitement. There—I will sit down," he added, throwing himself into an arm-chair. "And now, Meagles—queer name, Meagles—very queer—Meagles—Meagles," reiterated the miserable monarch, who always seemed to grow childish whenever he was much excited,—"and now, Meagles — Meagles — tell me what you want and all about it."

"In plain terms, then," said Tim, "I wish to know at what price your Majesty will purchase the *Correspondence between Miss Hannah Lightfoot and Lady Stamford: together with Important Memoranda and Explanatory Comments.*"

And as Meagles thus spoke, he drew forth the packet of papers and read the endorsement which we have printed in italics.

"Correspondence — Lady Stamford — Memoranda—Comments," murmured the King, becoming ghastly pale, and sinking back in the arm-chair: for he saw that he was completely in the power of Meagles and the Amazon—and moreover, reminiscences of a very sad and painful nature were now agitating wildly in his brain.

"We have him, my beauty," whispered Meagles aside to the huntress.

"He is at our mercy, Tim," responded the handsome widow, likewise speaking in a subdued tone. "Do not yield under a Dukedom, mind!"

"Nothing less," returned Meagles, with a resolute air.

"My good sir," at length said the King, now giving utterance to his words in a slow, solemn, and measured manner, "you have inflicted a deep wound upon my heart—or rather, you have torn open one which was barely skinned over. I shall not attempt to appear indifferent to the subject which has thus been brought so vividly to my notice. Doubtless the honour of your King is in your keeping: speak, therefore, without reserve—and fear no interruption from me. Now, sir, what have you to say?"

And resting his right elbow upon the arm of the chair, the monarch covered his face with the hand which at the same time supported his head.

"I am well pleased that your Majesty is prepared to listen calmly and tranquilly to the observations which I am about to make," said Meagles; "and as it will save your Majesty the pain of another interview with us, I will at once proceed to glance at the nature of these documents which I hold in my possession. Your Majesty will then be enabled to judge whether it be worth while to purchase the papers from me, and whether in the remuneration that I seek I have placed too high a value upon them."

"Proceed," said the King, still retaining the attitude of profound attention and of deep dejection which he had ere now assumed as he sate in the arm-chair.

"In the year 1756," resumed Meagles, "your Majesty, being at that time his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales, fell in with Miss Hannah Lightfoot and became enamoured of her. Your meetings were frequent, but innocent; and you found that the charming Quakeress was too pure to surrender herself to your wishes without marriage, or at least without the semblance or solemn promise of marriage. Thus compelled to adopt a decisive part, your Majesty—then Prince of Wales, as your son *now* is—wrote Miss Lightfoot a letter revealing your rank. This was in the month of February, 1757; and although the letter* is not in the collection which I now hold, there are many allusions to its contents in other letters which *are* in this correspondence. In the month of April, 1757, Hannah Lightfoot became your bride in the sight of heaven, the memorable certificate† to which I need not farther allude, being the means adopted by you to silence the scruples of the charming Quakeress. Towards the end of June of the same year, Miss Lightfoot found herself in a way to become a mother;‡ and she accompanied Lady Stamford to the Manor near Aylesbury. By a strange coincidence it happend that Lady Stamford had likewise just discovered that she was pregnant. Some weeks afterwards Hannah Lightfoot returned to London; and saw her nearly every day. Things went on thus until the month of January, 1758, when you appear to have made up your mind to dissolve the connexion. You accordingly wrote a long letter to Miss Lightfoot, breaking your intention to her as delicately as you were able. Almost heart-broken, the unhappy lady fled from London, and sought her friend Lady Stamford at the Manor.§ At that period both

* This letter, dated February 9, 1757, is given at page 52, Vol. I.

† Given at page 108, Vol. I.

‡ See letter, dated June 22, 1757, at page 52, Vol. I.

§ See letter, dated January 6th, 1758, at page 52, Vol. I.

Miss Lightfoot and Lady Stamford were in daily expectation of becoming mothers. And, as a natural sequence to that simultaneousness of pregnancy which I have before alluded to, they were delivered within a few hours of each other. And now comes the tremendous secret which is contained in the explanatory comments appended in Lady Stamford's own hand-writing, as it appears, to the correspondence which has fallen into my possession. But your Majesty is aware of it all! Yes—your Majesty is aware that Lady Stamford's child died a few hours after its birth, and that, with the concurrence of her husband Sir William, she adopted Miss Lightfoot's child as her own!"

"It is true—too true—all too true!" groaned the unhappy monarch, writhing in his chair, but still maintaining his hand over his countenance. "Go on—go on! What more do those papers reveal?"

"Have they not already proclaimed enough?" demanded Meagles. "Or do you wish me to repeat to your Majesty how the substitution of your child by Hannah Lightfoot for the child of Sir William and Lady Stamford, was duly communicated to you—how you approved of the proceeding as the only means of veiling the disgrace of the beauteous Quakeress and sparing her the crowning ignominy of expulsion from her sect—and how Sir William and Lady Stamford brought up the child as their own, adopted him as their heir, and left him all their property? Does your Majesty wish me to enter into such details as these?—and does your Majesty need to be reminded that your son by the unfortunate Hannah Lightfoot still lives—yes, lives in the person of that Sir Richard Stamford who has himself been so unfortunate? Ah! no wonder that he bears such a marvellous resemblance to the Royal Family of England——"

"Enough, enough!" exclaimed the King, now starting nervously from his seat: then, after passing to and fro in a state of dreadful agitation for several minutes, he suddenly stopped short—clutched Meagles violently by the arm—and said in a hollow voice, "I must have those papers! What is your price?"

"It is high, your Majesty," observed Meagles.

"Name it—name it," said the King, impatiently.

"A Dukedom!" was the startling response.

George III was rooted to the spot with the consternation that seized upon him at this demand;—and for upwards of a minute he stood with his eyes fixed in vacant wonderment on Meagles—his brows lifted—his mouth half open—and his whole aspect that of stolid amazement.

"A Dukedom!" at length he gasped forth;—and, turning abruptly away, he renewed his agitated walk to and fro in the Royal Closet.

"Don't be beaten down, Tim," whispered the Amazon, encouragingly,—"even though he should offer you a Marquisate."

"Yes, my beauty," responded Meagles: "I *will* take a Marquisate, with ten thousand a-year—but nothing less."

"Well—nothing less than a Marquisate, then," rejoined Lady Lade, in a tone of decision.

"Mr. Meagles," said the King, once more stopping short and addressing Tim in that same hollow voice which indicated feelings profoundly stirred,—"your price is too high! I could invent no possible excuse for conferring such a dignity upon you. But were your views less exalted—an Earldom, for instance——"

"I will not be too hard upon your Majesty," interrupted Tim; "and therefore I am willing to put up with a Marquisate. And surely your Majesty cannot be very fastidious upon the subject, when it is remembered that there are several Dukes in the peerage who have no better nor loftier claim to the distinction than the infamous character of their ancestresses. I allude to the titled descendants of the filthy strumpets who sold themselves to Charles II——"

"Enough, sir,—enough!" ejaculated the King, sternly: then, in a more conciliatory tone, he added, "Well—you shall have a Marquisate!"

"Ah! Tim, I always knew you would rise in the world!" exclaimed the Amazon, in a joyous tone: then, in a low and hurried whisper, she said, "And you will make me a Marchioness?"

"What does she say? what does she say?" demanded the King, his irritability returning, and his habit of reiteration along with it.

"Lady Lade desires me to bring this interview to an end as speedily as possible," returned Tim, with the utmost gravity; "inasmuch as she feels convinced it must prove painful to your Majesty."

"Did she say that? did she say that?" exclaimed the King. "Well, well—she's a good creature—a good creature. And now give me the papers—and you shall hear from me in a few days."

"Don't be such a fool, Tim," were the emphatic words which the huntress now whispered in her friend's ear.

"What does she say again? what does she say again?" cried the monarch, his nervousness increasing.

"Lady Lade most respectfully suggests," answered Meagles, with a low bow, "that it would be much more business-like to exchange the papers for the patent of nobility, and thus settle the whole thing at one and the same time."

"Eh! what? You don't mean to say you can't believe my word—my royal word?" exclaimed the King, becoming purple in the face, and fidgetting about as if he were standing with naked feet upon hot tiles.

"I am only afraid, may it please your Majesty," said Meagles, with another low bow, "that were I to deliver up the papers at present, so trifling an affair as the bestowal of a Marquisate might slip your Majesty's memory in the constant hurry, bustle, and excitement of the nation's business."

"Ah! I understand you, sir—I understand you," cried the monarch, scarcely able to restrain his spite and malignity at the galling humiliation to which he was thus subjected. "You won't take my word—my royal word—eh? But this is an insufferable insult, sir! And I am sure you don't want to insult your Sovereign, sir—insult your Sovereign? Come—did you ever know me break my word, sir? Speak—speak, man—I say. Did you ever know me to break my word?"

"Yes—and a woman's heart also!" was the dauntless reply given by Tim Meagles.

"My God! this is retribution!" murmured the wretched old monarch, as he staggered back and sank once more into the arm-chair: then covering his face with his hands, and apparently ceasing to recollect that any one was present to observe or hear him, he exclaimed in a voice of bitter anguish

"O Hannah Lightfoot! Hannah Lightfoot! thou art avenged—terribly avenged *now!*"

And the scalding tears trickled between the shrivelled fingers of George III.

For, oh! to the memory of this old man came back, with a whelming tide, all the incidents of his early love,—all his false vows—all his unredeemed pledges—all his flagrant perjury! Vivid and blasting, as the lightning flash, came it all back: crushing and annihilating as the thunder-stroke, fell the tremendous weight of recollections upon his mind! Monarch though he were, he was compelled to feel as a man: tyrant as he was over his millions of enslaved subjects, enslaved in return was he to the merciless despotism of his own conscience. Miserable, miserable King! how little wast thou *then!*—how insignificant in the bitterness of thy woe!

From the towering height of his lofty station and from the dizzy summit of his insatiable ambition, did he command the attention of the universe,—he who could not command a single one of all the agonising thoughts that racked him now! He who awed the nations, shrank appalled from the ghastliness of his own ideas. The man who had sought to retain the glorious gem of transatlantic power in his own regal diadem,—who was even at that moment studying to roll back the portentous tide of democracy which was sweeping over France and threatening to dash its waves against the white cliffs of Albion,—who kept his people enchained in iron bonds and sent forth his armies to ride rough-shod over the necks of his wronged subjects when assembling to petition for their rights,—he who did and was doing all this, was now crouching, and cowering, and grovelling beneath the spectral shapes which his own imagination conjured up! Yes—the monarch who lacerated the millions with knotted scourges, now felt his own conscience whipped with scorpions;—and he who had no remorse for the countless hearts which his tyranny made to weep so bitterly, was now himself inwardly shedding tears of blood in the compunction of his soul for the memory of Hannah Lightfoot!

For several minutes did George III thus remain a prey to the most torturing reflections,—utterly unmindful of the presence of Tim Meagles and the Amazon, who were all the while exchanging looks of satisfaction at the evident success of their projects. At length the King suddenly recollected their presence: and, ashamed of the emotions to which he had given way, his Majesty wiped away the tears from his cheeks—smothered his harrowing sensations as well as he was able—and, rising from the arm-chair, said, "Mr. Meagles you shall have the Marquisate as soon as the affair can be arranged."

"With a pension to enable me to support the title?" added Tim.

"Be it so," rejoined his Majesty: then, after a few moments' deep reflection, he said, "But this matter must be managed without scandal—or rather, with as little scandal as possible. You know that you have no ostensible or apparent claims upon the Crown for any reward or recompense at all: we must therefore *invent* those claims. Do you understand me?"

"To some extent, sire," answered Tim. "What does your Majesty propose?"

"I will examine the list of extinct peerages without delay," returned the King, speaking in a slow and measured tone; "and we will pitch upon some Marquisate, to which you shall lay claim. The necessary documents to establish that claim can easily be prepared; and when the matter comes before the proper Committee in the House of Lords, I will take care that the decision shall be rendered in your favour. This may be an affair of some months: indeed, it cannot possibly be settled until the beginning of next year:—and in the meantime——"

"In the meantime the papers shall be sealed up and religiously kept from every eye," added Meagles.

"It is to your own interest to observe that condition of our bargain," said the King. "Our interview is now at an end."

And bowing slightly, his Majesty turned abruptly away: while Tim Meagles and the Amazon withdrew, overjoyed at the complete success that had attended their second visit to the King of England.

CHAPTER CCI.

THE SEARCH AFTER A SON.—HORROR!

EARLY on the ensuing morning the Court removed from London to Windsor Castle;—and George III, who had exhibited symptoms of alarming restlessness and irritability from the moment of his interview with Meagles and Lady Lade, shut himself up in his own apartment under pretence of having several State documents to examine.

The unhappy monarch now experienced a deep and irresistible yearning to behold his son;—not either of those sons whom his wife Queen Charlotte had borne him,—but that son who had owed his existence to the amour with Hannah Lightfoot.

The reader may have seen from the terms in which Meagles explained the nature of the correspondence and other papers in his possession, that the King had all along been aware of the substitution of his own child by the beauteous Quakeress for the dead offspring of Sir William and Lady Stamford. Such was indeed the case. From the very first the monarch knew of that circumstance: but as years and years rolled on, he had thought less and less of the fact that he had an unacknowledged son in the world. Hannah Lightfoot carried the secret with her to the grave;—and Sir William and Lady Stamford died also without breathing that secret to a soul. Thus when the present Sir Richard Stamford succeeded to the title and estates, it was under the impression that he really and truly was the son of the deceased baronet and his lady;—and King George III, perceiving how religiously the secret had been kept, never felt the least inclination to enlighten Sir Richard upon the point.

When Sir Richard's misfortunes commenced and he was accused of the fearful crimes recorded in the opening chapter of our tale, the King experienced emotions of sorrow and alarm at the predicament in which that man who was really his son had become involved. But he dared not interfere: and he was compelled likewise to throw a

veil over his affliction—or at least attribute it to some other cause. The newspapers of the time had represented the fact of the extraordinary resemblance which Sir Richard Stamford bore to the Royal Family;—and the King often sighed profoundly in secret as those statements recalled so vividly to his recollection all the incidents of his early love and his amour with Hannah Lightfoot. It had been therefore with an unfeigned joy that his Majesty, after anxiously watching the progress of events and greedily devouring all that the public prints detailed with regard to Sir Richard Stamford,—it was with an indescribable relief, we say, that the King read at length of the baronet's complete exculpation from the monstrous charges laid against him.

And now that any circumstances connected with the amour of his earlier years was brought back more vividly than ever to the memory of the monarch,—now that his interview with Meagles and Lady Letitia Lade had bared the wounds that time had failed to heal altogether,—and now that the minutest associations belonging to the history and fate of Hannah Lightfoot, were aroused to new life in the depth of his soul,—it is not to be wondered at if the miserable monarch were led by those reminiscences and those feelings to experience a strong, a natural, and irresistible yearning at least to behold the man on whom he had stamped his image.

Persons who have offended against the laws of society or of nature, are oft-times moved by singular and irresistible impulses to revisit the scene of their iniquity, even though years and years may have passed away—or else to make atonement by anonymous means to the individuals whom they wronged in earlier days. The undetected murderer is sure to experience a hankering and longing to return to the spot where he buried his victim; and the inscrutable hand of destiny will be certain sooner or later to conduct him thither, even in spite of himself. The man

who has gathered gold in the nastiest ways, remembers at length the petty sums which he pilfered when a boy from his master's till: and in an anonymous letter he returns the amount, with interest and compound interest duly reckoned—and then his conscience is satisfied. In the same manner does compunction frequently smite the hearts of men who have succeeded in what is called "defrauding the revenue;" and hence those anonymous remittances to the Chancellor of the Exchequer which are acknowledged day after day in the *Times* newspaper. Such is the wondrous texture of the human mind; and therefore it cannot be a matter for astonishment if King George III now experienced those inscrutable yearnings which prompted him to seek out his son and at least set eyes upon him once in this world, if not to reveal to his ears the tremendous secret of their close affinity.

Throughout the day following his interview with Meagles and the huntress at St James's Palace, this inclination grew stronger and stronger in the breast of the King. It settled down into one of those invincible longings which so often take possession of the human mind, especially when in a morbid state: it assumed the character of an irresistible craving that would upset the very reason if not gratified.

Hours passed away thus, while the monarch at one time paced his apartment in a condition of fearful excitement, and at another flung himself upon a sofa and gave way to the bitterest anguish. The image of Hannah Lightfoot seemed to haunt him,—to stand before him whichever way he turned his looks—to be *there*, in his presence, even though he shut his eyes with the thought of testing the reality of the apparition. He saw her, young and lovely as she was when he first knew her,—but with a melancholy air subduing the captivating sweetness and the winning charms of her modest beauty;—he saw her with her sylph-like form so full of the elegance and grace which her sectarian dress set off and did not mar;—he saw her with those melting liquid eyes, so full of a mournful tenderness, and with the roses of her lips parted by the saddest smile above the strings of pearls that shone between! Yes—it was thus he saw her *now*,—saw her only in imagination, it was true,—but still saw her as plainly, and as clearly, and as visibly as if she were indeed there as a being of flesh and blood!

"Oh! do not haunt me thus, Hannah—do not haunt me thus!" exclaimed the King aloud, in the bitterness of his mental misery, "Ah! I wronged thee—my God! I wronged thee—I know that I wronged thee! But thou wilt forgive me, Hannah—thou wilt forgive me! Oh! do not look so reproachfully upon me! I will see our son—I will assure myself that he is happy. Ah! now thou seemest to smile, Hannah: thou art pleased by that promise! Well, then, I will propitiate thy shade: thou shalt sleep tranquilly in thy tomb! Yes—I will see our son;—and if he be poor, I will enrich him—if he be ambitious, I will ennoble him—if he be in sorrow, I will sympathise with him. But thou dost not require that I shall tell him who he really is?—thou dost not demand that I shall confess to him the secret of his birth? Oh! now thy looks become sombre again! Well, then, I will reveal to him even *that*: yes, thy shade shall be appeased, Hannah—only do not haunt me thus!"

And then the image of the long dead Quakeress appeared to grow fainter and fainter—dying away in a gossamer transparency, until it seemed to mingle with the ambient air.

Then the monarch, considerably tranquillised, but having resolved to lose no time in adopting measures to search for his unacknowledged son, quitted his chamber and joined the Royal Family at the dinner-table. When the repast was concluded,—it being now about eight o'clock in the evening,—the King retired again to his own apartment, whither he summoned a confidential page.

"Listen attentively to what I am about to say to you," began the monarch, in a calm and deliberate voice. "You have doubtless heard of a certain Sir Richard Stamford, who possessed near Aylesbury a mansion which, as I have been told, he disposed of some months since to Lord Desborough?"

"I have not only heard of that same Sir Richard Stamford, sire," answered the page: "but I know him well by sight. Indeed, I saw him this morning——"

"This morning!" ejaculated the King: "this morning—eh? Where did you see him, sir—where did you see him?"

"May it please your Majesty, Sir Richard Stamford dwells in the immediate vicinity of Windsor," returned the page: "and he frequently walks in the park. His extraordinary resemblance to your most gracious Majesty's son, the Prince of Wales, is the theme of conversation in Windsor."

"Do you know exactly where he lives?" demanded the monarch, after a few minutes' reflection.

"I do, sire," was the response.

"Then lead me thither, young gentleman," said the King. "I must see this Richard Stamford upon business of private importance. And, hark you, sir—take care that no one knows of the visit which I am about to pay him."

The page bowed submission to this command; and he and the King sallied forth from the Castle by the most secret means of egress.

The distance which they had to traverse was not very great; and when they arrived within sight of the house which the page pointed out to the monarch, his Majesty bade the youth return to the Castle.

A strange feeling now seized upon George III, as he paused for a moment to contemplate that dwelling which stood out, in the solitude of its site, from amidst the scene that was otherwise dimly outlined in the obscurity of the evening: and a sensation which appeared to him like a presentiment of evil, gradually crept over his entire frame.

At length, summoning all his presence of mind to aid him in a course along which an irresistible power seemed to be impelling him, the monarch approached the door, at which he knocked gently. The summons was soon answered by the landlady—an old woman of respectable appearance;—and, by the light which she carried in her hand, she immediately recognised the King.

"Hush!" said his Majesty, perceiving that he was known: and, entering the passage, he asked, "Is Sir Richard Stamford within?"

"Yes, sire," returned the landlady. "But——"

"Not another word!" said the King, cutting short whatever objection she was about to make. "Which is his apartment?"

"Up stairs, may it please your Majesty," rejoined the old woman. "I will show your Majesty the way."

"No—I will go alone," he observed. "There—keep the candle for a few moments at the foot of the stairs—and don't follow me."

The landlady saw that the King was much agitated; and, with that habit of passive obedience which is engendered by the servile and degraded condition of all the humbler ranks in this wretched country, she dared not give utterance to the words that were nevertheless trembling at the tip of her tongue. For she knew that Sir Richard Stamford was *not* alone;—and although she was unaware of the name and high position of the lady who was wont to visit him, but who always came so closely veiled as to defy the most piercing observation to catch a glimpse of her countenance,—the old woman nevertheless felt assured that her lodger and his fair companion did not wish to be disturbed, even by the visit of Royalty.

But she held her peace through awe and dread of that King whom she had been taught to look upon as a being second only to the god-head;—and even with that debased and servile feeling of mingled terror and veneration, was united one of gratification at the thought that her humble abode should be thus honoured by the presence of Royalty. Honoured, indeed!—a precious honour to have that scrofulous, sanctimonious, blood-thirsty old tyrant crossing her threshold!

However, there she stood at the foot of the stairs—holding the candle in her hand, while the King ascended with a somewhat hasty step. On reaching the landing he opened the door that immediately faced him;—but he was suddenly struck with an appalling consternation at the spectacle which met his eyes. Yet what baleful scene—what terrible aspect had paralysed and transfixed him thus? Behold! Sir Richard Stamford was seated upon a sofa—and half reclining in his arms was her Royal Highness the Princess Amelia!

So deeply absorbed were the tender pair in the vows and pledges of love which they were breathing in murmured tones to each other, and in the fervid caresses which they intermingled with their discourse, that they heard not the opening of the door: but all on a sudden it was closed with violence, and an ejaculation of horror blended with a poignant anguish smote simultaneously upon their ears.

They started up—and a stifled shriek burst from the lips of the Princess Amelia as her eyes encountered the ghastly looks of her royal father: then, throwing herself at his feet, she extended her clasped hands towards him, exclaiming, "Pardon me—pardon me, beloved parent—have mercy upon me!"

"Unhappy girl!" cried the King, fearfully agitated and unable to control his words: "you know not what you have done nor whom you love—for that man is your brother!"

"No, no, dear father!" exclaimed the Princess: "it is only a wondrous likeness which deceives you—this is Sir Richard Stamford!"

"I know it—I know it," groaned the unhappy monarch: "but he is my son—the offspring of Hannah Lightfoot——"

"O horror!" exclaimed the baronet: and sinking upon the sofa, he covered his face with his hands and gave irresistible vent to the convulsive anguish of his soul.

"Just heaven! what mean you, father?" cried the Princess Amelia at the same moment—and she sprang from her kneeling posture like a corpse that is galvanised.

"I mean," said the King, staggering beneath the weight of a tremendous affliction and speaking in a hollow voice,—"I mean that in my youth I loved and seduced a heavenly creature—and that Sir Richard Stamford——"

"Oh! say no more—say no more!" murmured the Princess, tottering to a seat, on which she fell: "he is my brother—my brother—and God will avenge this incest!"

"Incest! no—no—do not *say that!*" exclaimed the wretched King, shivering all over: "you have not been thus far culpable, Amelia?—tell me that you have not!"

But the unhappy Princess made no reply. Pale as marble, and with arms hanging straight down as if she had lost their use, Amelia reclined back in the chair—her eyes fixed with a vacant wildness upon the ghastly and convulsing countenance of the King.

And now this miserable monarch could no longer repress the groans and anguished sobs that bespoke all the horror of the ideas agitating in his brain, and affording so unquestionable a confirmation of the appalling truth of the tale of incest which had thus reached its crowning catastrophe.

No pen can describe the full horror of the scene;—no power of language can do justice to the exquisite agony that was experienced by the Baronet, the tremendous remorse and withering self-reproaches endured by the monarch, or the dumb and blank despair that had seized upon the guilty girl. Never—oh! never did the four walls of a room enclose three human beings so utterly stricken by all the most rending or annihilating feelings that the human breast can know: never was the atmosphere of a dwelling-place so laden with passionate ejaculations of bitter misery, or pierced by looks of such wild and fearful meaning. For the word *Incest* had stricken like a moral pestilence upon two hearts that a few moments before were beating with fervid love, and had excited in a third heart all the excruciating agonies of remorse. Hell seemed to have opened at the feet of those three beings: demons appeared to hold them in their infernal grasp;—and their very souls had become bottomless pits wherein their feelings were stinging them like scorpions.

At length Sir Richard Stamford suddenly started from his seat;—and clutching the monarch violently by the arm, he said in a hollow tone, "Is all this true?—or is it a hideous dream?"

"It is true—it is true," sobbed the almost heart-broken monarch. "You are my son—and yet I dare not embrace you, after the appalling discovery that has just been made!"

"No—no—you cannot embrace me—I feel that you can not!" groaned the baronet. "But you will not curse me——"

"Holy God! it is for you, Richard, to curse *me!*" exclaimed the King, writhing in the anguish of his spirit.

"Curse not—neither the one nor the other!" cried the Princess Amelia, recalled to sense and recollection by that awful word which fell like the voice of the dead upon her ears: then, slowly rising from her seat, and fixing upon her father's countenance a look so woe-begone and so full of horror that it froze all the blood in his veins and made him feel as if some hideous destiny were impelling him on to become the executioner of his own child, she said in a voice that was tremulous but painfully clear, "Remember that there is still one sorrow and one in-

fame greater and more terrible than what we already know—and that is *exposure before the world!*"

"True!" ejaculated the King. "These very walls may have ears!"

"Silence for a moment!" said the baronet: and noiselessly opening the door, he looked forth upon the staircase and listened. "We are safe thus far—and the dreadful secret is known but to us three," he observed, returning into the room and shutting the door. "All is quiet in the house—and besides, the worthy couple to whom it belongs are not eaves-droppers."

"The secret, then, remains with ourselves—and with our consciences," said the Princess Amelia, the accent of despair marking the latter portion of the sentence. "But what brought you hither, father?—and does any one suspect or know that I have been accustomed to visit this house——"

"It was no hint nor information of that kind which brought me here to-night," interrupted the King. "Nature's yearnings prompted me to seek an interview with that son who knew not the secret of his birth, and whom perhaps I should not have acknowledged, had not the scene which burst upon my eyes evoked the dread revelation from my lips. But tell me, unhappy children—tell me—are you privately married?—has the ceremony of the church seemed to consecrate this love of yours?"

"Ah! how could a Princess of the blood-royal go through such a mock form? and who would celebrate the rite?" demanded Amelia bitterly. "No, sire—our love has been in every way unblest: and now it is positively accursed," she added, sinking back upon the chair and giving vent to her renewed anguish in a flood of scalding tears.

"Weep not, Amelia—weep not, I conjure you!" exclaimed the baronet, himself almost overcome with a fresh paroxysm of bitter feeling. "The past cannot be recalled—nor even expiated," he continued, in a voice convulsed with anguish: "but penitence and deep contrition may atone for somewhat of its enormity. God knows that we sinned in ignorance of these close ties of kinship?"

"Come, my unhappy Amelia," said the King; "and let us return home. The prolongation of this wretched scene will only plunge us all into a deeper abyss of woe—if that be possible. Richard, I will see you again shortly—when our minds shall have become more composed."

But the miserable baronet heard not the words which his royal father thus addressed to him. With his head buried in his hands, he sate writhing and weeping upon the sofa;—and when he raised his eyes again, at the expiration of a few minutes, he found himself alone.

CHAPTER CCII.

THE MILLINER AND HER MASTER.

THE scene once more shifts to Mrs. Brace's elegantly furnished little parlour at her house in Pall Mall; and between ten and eleven o'clock at night we shall find her seated in that room where she had received in her time so many distinguished visitors.

She was not alone upon the present occasion. Mr. Frederick Dray, metamorphosed into a fine gentleman, was her companion;—and having just returned from a gambling-house where he had been losing a considerable sum of money, he was in a particularly bad humour. Moreover, the man had felt unwell for the last two or three days;—and as it was the first time in all his life that he had suffered from indisposition, he was not very patient under the influence of the disagreeable sensations which he experienced.

The milliner herself was much altered. Her countenance was haggard and care-worn; and the rouge upon her cheeks only rendered her aspect the more ghastly. Her eyes, once so fine, were sunken and hollow: their lustre had become dimmed—and the flesh was blue around them. Her figure had lost much of its glorious *embonpoint;* and, although still stout, it no longer wore the appearance of plumpness and firmness which formerly constituted the voluptuous richness of her contours. There was still the same elegant neatness in her apparel—still the same coquetry in her Parisian cap: but the effect was no longer what it was wont to be—and the most careless eye could now perceive that those aids of an exquisite toilette which had recently set off the milliner's charms to the best advantage, were now called into requisition to conceal the decay of her fading beauty.

The hue of her lips was less vivid—and although the teeth were as fine as ever, the smile that occasionally revealed them was sickly and wan. The motions and attitudes of the milliner had lost their buxom graces and their elasticity: they were now languid and drooping. A melancholy inflection had subdued the harmonious joyousness of her voice: care was in every look—woe upon every feature—sorrow in every accent;—and the buxom, gay, and wanton Mrs. Brace had become changed in the course of a short time into the fading, broken-spirited, and passionless woman.

The supper was spread upon the table, and two or three bottles of wine stood upon the buffet ready to be decanted if required, when Mr. Frederick Dray entered the room. Tossing down his hat in a corner, he flung himself into an arm-chair with the unmistakable self-abandonment of a man who is ill at ease alike in mind and body: then fixing his eyes upon Mrs. Brace, he said in a savage tone, "Well, always these mournful looks whenever I come home! What the devil does it mean?"

"I have told you over and over again, Frederick," answered the milliner, in a deep, sorrowful voice, "that I am unhappy—very unhappy; and I cannot therefore control my looks."

"Then why don't you drink champagne and drown care?" demanded Dray, brutally.

"Because when the effect goes off and the period of reaction comes," replied the woman, "I feel so miserable that I am afraid to be alone, lest I should commit suicide. *This* also have I told you before a dozen times; and yet you are always putting the same question to me."

"Because I hate to see you look so cursed unhappy," rejoined Dray. "Wretchedness is catching—and when you're in bad spirits like this I always begin to feel such dismal forebodings. In fact I don't know what the devil has been the matter with me for the last three or four days: but one thing is certain—that I am deucedly out of sorts."

"Will you not take any supper?" asked the milliner, but only with a sort of mechanical formality and not with any manifestation of tender concern for her paramour's indisposition.

"No—I can't eat," he replied; "and what's worse, I seem to have got a nausea for drinking also."

"The excitement of gambling is killing you," observed Mrs. Brace, coldly.

"Ah! you say that, because I have made some tolerably heavy drains upon your purse lately—or rather *our* purse," exclaimed Frederick: "for we are as good as man and wife, although you won't have the nuptial knot tied. But, however, *that* doesn't matter much, seeing that we live together just the same as if ten thousand parsons had spoken what they call the marriage blessing. Now, my dear, when I first insisted upon our entering on this pleasant and agreeable understanding together, you prated a great deal about such a step being the ruin of your establishment——"

"I told you, Frederick," interposed Mrs. Brace, with some degree of warmth, "that if you persisted in placing yourself on terms of equality with me and becoming the master of the house, the business would be injured in every way. And my words have come true. All my rich patrons have deserted the establishment in St. James's Square—and day after day the custom of the millinery department is falling off."

"Is it indeed, though?" exclaimed Dray.

"I have already assured you more than once that such is the fact," returned Mrs. Brace.

"Well, perhaps you have," said the man, now resuming his wonted manner of careless indifference: "but I don't recollect everything unpleasant you tell me. As for how the business in either establishment can fall off, I really don't understand: because none of the patrons of the accommodation-house in the Square could possibly have supposed that you were immaculate—especially as most of them have no doubt enjoyed your favours at one time or another;—and why the fashionable demireps who used to frequent the shop and show-rooms, should leave you because you now live openly with a lover instead of conducting your little amours on the sly, I can't understand either."

"If I were to explain the matter to you, Frederick," said Mrs. Brace, "you would only be offended—and then we should have one of those violent scenes to which you so readily give way and which have not been the most insignificant causes of the wretchedness that is crushing me."

"'Pon my soul I won't say an angry word if you'll explain yourself," observed the ex-footman. "Somehow or another I feel in a humour to talk over our affairs to-night. So speak out—and don't be afraid."

"Well, then," resumed Mrs. Brace, "if I had taken a lord or a well-born gentleman to live openly with me, I should not have been deserted by one of my old friends and numerous patrons—no, nor yet by my lady-customers in the millinery department. But they will never forgive me for having raised a footman from the kitchen to the parlour."

"Then curse them all for their impudence!" growled Dray, savagely.

"Ah! it is very easy to curse them," exclaimed Mrs. Brace, warming with her subject: "but curses won't replenish the till in the shop, nor put gold into my private purse;—and at the rate which you are going on, we shall soon be ruined—utterly ruined. Do you know how much money—hard cash, I mean—you have had of me during the few weeks of our connexion in this manner?"

"Oh! I suppose you keep an account, then?" said Dray, gloomily.

"To be sure I do," returned Mrs. Brace: "and I can tell you that between three and four thousand pounds have been lost by you at the gaming-table, in addition to the extravagant mode of living which you have introduced into the house. Things can't go on as they are—and I am therefore glad you are in a humour to talk over our affairs to-night."

"I am infernally out of sorts," said Dray, who really looked very unwell and sate uneasily in his chair; "and I suppose it's because I am not well, that I have got gloomy ideas in my head. Come, I'll forgive you for what you told me about elevating a footman from the kitchen to the parlour; and I'll reason with you tranquilly and quietly over our position and our plans. What would you advise?"

"Let us leave the country and go to America," said Mrs. Brace. "I am sick and tired of England: besides—there is the constant danger," she added, a deep gloom suddenly overspreading her countenance, "of a discovery——"

"Hush! I know what you mean—I should be a fool if I didn't," interrupted Frederick Dray: then, with a significant look, he added, "And you know, my dear, you had some very serious thoughts of bolting off to America and leaving me in the lurch, just after that affair of Mobbs: but I surprised you—discovered your secret intent——"

"Well, well—we need talk no more of that," cried Mrs. Brace, impatiently. "I gave you a solemn pledge to abandon that project, at least until you were disposed to fall into my views: and I have kept my word."

"Yes—because I threatened to blow your brains out if I caught you at any tricks again," observed Frederick, with a renewal of his savage tone and manner.

"Why treat me thus harshly, when we are discoursing together upon serious matters?" said Mrs Brace, the tears trickling down her cheeks.

"Come, come—no whimpering now!" ejaculated Dray. "It is this cursed feeling of uneasiness which I experience all over," he added, in a milder voice, "which makes me cross towards you. I have got a head-ache, and a general unpleasant feeling throughout my body. But what were we talking about? Oh! I remember—you propose to leave England and be off to America. Well—I am not so averse to that plan as I was some weeks ago. London then appeared full of pleasures to me: but now I am surfeited with them—nauseated—almost disgusted. And since you assure me that the business is falling off——"

"You cannot doubt it!" ejaculated Mrs. Brace. "Three months ago I had eleven young ladies in the establishment: and now there are but three. Rachel Forrester wanted to come back again yesterday, after the severe illness which followed her confinement;—and I was compelled to refuse the poor girl's application. All my economy does not counterbalance your wasteful expenditure: and although since Harriet left, I have not engaged another lady's-maid——"

"Ah! poor Harriet—she has been confined, too," observed Dray, with a heartless indifference of manner. "Let me see—her month is pretty nearly up—and she will be wanting to come back——"

"Or else to be well provided for," added Mrs. Brace. "Heavens! what trouble that young woman has given me! The coaxings and threats—the entreaties and menaces that I have used—the money I have given her—the difficulty I had in persuading her to leave the house ere her condition became visible——"

"Well, well—you needn't recapitulate all these

things, Fanny," interrupted Frederick Dray. "I am not ignorant of what you have had to contend with on that score."

"Yes—and on others likewise," added Mrs. Brace, with a tone of bitter anguish. "Surely you have not forgotten those two vile women who came some weeks ago——"

"Elizabeth Marks and Poll Price, I think they called themselves—eh?" observed the ex-footman. "Well they asked us about Mobbs—and if it hadn't been for your cursed trembling and stammering, I should have thrown them completely off the scent."

"How absurdly you talk, Frederick," said the milliner, in a low and hollow whisper,—"when you must remember that those women already knew too much—that they had heard from Mobbs sufficient to convince them that Grumley had experienced foul play beneath this roof——Nay, more," continued Mrs. Brace, horror convulsing her form and rendering her countenance hideously ghastly,—"they said they could even point out the place where Grumley was interred——"

"Well—and you gave them five hundred pounds to make them hold their tongues," interrupted Frederick Dray. Nothing was more simple: "they came to extort money—they had us in their power—your fears confirmed all their suspicions—and so we were obliged to shell out."

"And think you that those women will not come back again?" asked Mrs. Brace. "I tell you that we are surrounded by a myriad dangers—that perils and perplexities of all kinds environ us—and that they will gradually close in upon us in such a manner as to render escape impossible. My God! you see, Frederick, the change that care and terror are working in me! I cannot conceal the truth from myself—I am getting prematurely old—and in a few months I shall become faded, decrepit, and gray as a woman of sixty—I who am still in the prime of life! Let us leave England, then, ere it be too late: let us proceed to America while we have yet enough left to convey us thither and establish us in some business on our arrival. Here—in this country—we are a constant prey to the extortioner. Those women will return—depend upon it, they will return shortly;—and Harriet will likewise prove a drag upon us. Say, then, Frederick—shall we fly together——"

"Give me four-and-twenty hours to consider upon it, Fanny," exclaimed the ex-footman; "and most likely my decision shall be in accordance with your wishes. But this cursed uneasy feeling is growing upon me so rapidly——"

"You do indeed look very unwell," observed the milliner. "Shall I send for a doctor?—or will you go to bed and take some medicine?"

"Neither," returned Dray. "I mistrust doctors and can't bear physic. Perhaps it is the excitement of that cursed gaming-table; and a good night's rest will take it all away."

"Ah! a good night's rest," murmured the unhappy woman, with a profound sigh. "Would to heaven that I might enjoy one! But let me offer you a glass of wine—some of your favourite champagne," she hastened to observe, perceiving that Frederick's brow grew overcast at the renewal of her melancholy musings.

"Yes—give me a glass of champagne," he said, pettishly: "I can but see what it will do for me."

The milliner rose from her seat—uncorked a bottle of Epernay—and, filling a glass, presented it while yet effervescing to her paramour. The man took it in his hand and raised it to his lips: but some indescribable feeling of nausea and loathing prompted him to repel it—and hastily giving back the glass to Mrs. Brace, he said in a shuddering tone, "By heavens! I am very ill."

The milliner now once more urged upon him the necessity of going to bed; and Dray yielded to her persuasion. It was with some difficulty that he could ascend the stairs: a violent headache and an increasing sense of weakness combined not only to distract him but also to paralyse his physical energies. But when once he had laid aside his apparel and had retired to rest, he felt somewhat better. Still, however, he refused to have any professional advice or take medicine; and in a few minutes he fell asleep.

Mrs. Brace, who had assisted him in ascending to the bed-chamber, now retraced her way down stairs to assure herself, according to custom, that the house was all safe ere she retired for the night. She dismissed the servants to their respective rooms—locked up the plate and wine—and was about to rejoin her paramour, when a low double knock at the front door fell upon her ears.

She started and shuddered all over—for the guilty conscience is as easily ruffled by the most ordinary circumstances as the aspen by the gentlest breezes: but recovering her presence of mind, she proceeded to answer the summons.

On opening the front door, she beheld by the lamp-light a black youth dressed in the apparel of a page, and who immediately inquired in a soft musical voice "whether he had the pleasure of speaking to Mrs. Brace." The milliner responded in the affirmative; and the sable visitor thereupon besought a few minutes' private conversation upon a matter of some importance.

CHAPTER CCIII.

RAO AND THE MILLINER.

MRS. BRACE at once led the black page into her parlour, where the lights were still burning upon the table; and having requested him to be seated, she could not help admiring the great beauty of his person. The symmetry of his shape was admirably set off by the livery which he wore; and there was an air of gracefulness and gentility about him which was well calculated to interest even the most callous observer. His hair was of the glossiest sable, but fine as silk: and it showered in a thousand ringlets over his sloping shoulders. His large black eyes beamed with the fires of intellect; and between the scarlet lips the teeth shone like rows of pearls.

Rao—for the reader has doubtless experienced no difficulty in recognising Lord Florimel's sable page in the person of Mrs. Brace's visitor—Rao, we say, seated himself in compliance with the invitation so courteously given. But whether he felt somewhat embarrassed at the earnest attention with which the milliner surveyed him from the moment she escorted him into the room—or whether it were a purely accidental circumstance, we cannot say: sure enough, however, it was that scarcely had he taken a chair when he turned himself round in such a manner as to place his back to the candles. His looks then wandered rapidly over Mrs. Brace's countenance and entire form;—and

for a moment—a single moment—his dark eyes flamed with the light of malignant satisfaction. But this expression was so transitory—so evanescent, that the milliner could not have observed it, even if Rao's face had been turned towards the candles.

"Madam," he said, at length breaking silence, "I have to apologise in the first instance for disturbing you at this unseemly hour: but I was led to believe that you are not in the habit of retiring very early, and moreover that the mention of Lord Florimel's name would guarantee me against your displeasure——"

"Ah! you are in the service of his lordship?" inquired Mrs. Brace, who, from old habits and associations, felt herself suddenly cheered by the evident fact that she was not altogether forgotten by one of her best and most liberal patrons.

"I am not only in the service, but likewise in the confidence of his lordship," returned Rao: "and he has deputed me to wait upon you, madam, to assist in a somewhat difficult and certainly very romantic enterprise in which he is engaged. He moreover charged me to intimate, with all due delicacy, that your reward shall be liberal."

"It is by no means necessary to give me that assurance, my pretty boy," said the milliner, with a more sunny smile than any that had played upon her countenance for some time past. "Tell me how I can forward the views of my dear friend Florimel—and he shall find me as ready and anxious to serve him as ever."

"No doubt," remarked the sable page with a laconic dryness which for a moment struck the milliner as peculiar. "His lordship," Rao hastened to observe, "has always spoken of you, madam, in the kindest and indeed the most affectionate terms——"

"I am charmed to hear that I still retain your master's friendship," observed Mrs. Brace, now ceasing to remember the strange tone in which the curt remark of Rao had been uttered a few moments previously. "I heard that his lordship had been absent from home for some weeks; and I was likewise informed that his lordship had suffered from severe indisposition previous to his departure."

"True enough, madam," said Rao. "And now, with your permission," he continued, "I will give you such explanations as time and circumstances permit."

"I am all attention," observed the milliner, forgetting for the moment her cares and troubles in the excitement of a resuscitating spirit of intrigue."

"I must begin, madam, by informing you," proceeded Rao, "that my master Lord Florimel has become desperately enamoured of a lady——"

"Do you mean Miss Pauline Clarendon?" interrupted the milliner.

"No, madam: his lordship is completely cured of that silly and romantic passion," answered Rao; "and he now loves one who possesses an ardour of temperament and a voluptuousness of disposition quite equal to his own. But the splendid creature who has thus ensnared his heart and gained a complete empire over him, is a being shrouded in the deepest and most impenetrable mystery,—a mystery which, for some reasons unknown alike to my noble master and myself, must endure until *after* the nuptial knot shall have been tied. In plain terms, madam, this lady will not reveal either her name or her countenance until the matrimonial ceremony shall have united her to Lord Florimel by indissoluble bonds."

"What!" ejaculated the milliner, profoundly surprised: "do you mean to tell me that his lordship is in love with a lady whose features he has never seen?"

"Such is indeed the fact, madam," replied Rao, "extraordinary as it may seem. But that she is gloriously handsome, Lord Florimel is convinced; and assuredly a disagreeable countenance never could have been united by nature with such a splendid form. That her features *are* perfect, however, he entertains no doubt: for in the darkness and secrecy of the boudoirs of love where they have met—alike at Dover and in London—his hand has wandered over her countenance, tracing its configuration and thereby ascertaining the shape of every lineament."

"Then this lady is not a model of chastity and virtue?" said the milliner, inquiringly."

"With *that*, madam, you and I have no concern," answered Rao. "Suffice it for us to know that she chooses to enshroud herself in the deepest, darkest, most impenetrable mystery, until the bonds of marriage shall have made Lord Florimel her own—and then the imperious necessity which now renders her as it were a living, breathing, loving enigma, will exist no longer. The veil will be torn from her countenance as well as from her rank and name;—and from all that she has told my master, it appears certain that he will not have to repent of the match."

"But this is the most extraordinary romance that I ever became acquainted with!" cried Mrs. Brace, in undisguised amazement. "Surely no such infatuation was ever heard of before: and for an experienced, intelligent, worldly-minded man like Lord Florimel to have yielded to this enchantment and succumb to what after all may prove a dreadful delusion——"

"Madam," said Rao, now interrupting the milliner with some degree of impatience, "I beseech you to observe that I have not sought your presence for the purpose of discussing these affairs. My object is to learn whether you will aid in conducting them to that issue on which both the lady and my noble master are fully and unalterably agreed?"

"I have already given you my assurances in that respect," answered Mrs. Brace. "Proceed, you interesting boy—and I will endeavour to forbear from any further comment upon this adventure, singular and almost incredible though it be."

"Ah! madam," exclaimed Rao, "the world is full of singular and scarcely credible proceedings; and doubtless your experience will at once suggest many particulars and incidents only too well calculated to confirm the remark that I have just made."

"True, true!" cried Mrs. Brace, somewhat troubled for the instant by the piercing, searching, peculiar look which the black page fixed upon her; but as his eyes were almost immediately withdrawn from her countenance, the effect of that deeply penetrating gaze was as speedily forgotten. "And now, my young friend, in what manner can I assist your noble master's projects?" she inquired: "what is the nature of the service that is demanded of me?"

"To-morrow evening, madam," returned Rao, "Lord Florimel will be in London. His mysterious charmer was to have come back to the metropolis to-day: and no doubt she has fulfilled her intention in this respect. I also arrived from Dover this evening, having been admitted into the confidence of his lordship and entrusted by him with the management of the necessary preparations for the marriage."

"Ah! then the ceremony is to take place shortly?" said Mrs. Brace.

"To-morrow evening, if possible," replied Rao: "and in this house, if you have no objection."

"Certainly not!" exclaimed the milliner, who was now considerably interested in a proceeding which promised a handsome recompense. "But wherefore all this mystery—this privacy?—why should not the ceremony take place at Lord Florimel's own mansion?"

"Simply because the world must not know that any of that extraordinary mystery and privacy has characterised the affair," returned the sable page. "When once it is all over and the necessity for that secrecy shall have ceased to exist, Lord Florimel may bear home his splendid bride; and the fact that they *are* married will be sufficient for society to learn, without suffering any of the contingent circumstances to transpire. Now do you comprehend the motives for pushing the observance of the darkest mystery up to the very last instant that such mystery is absolutely necessary to the circumstances in which the lady is placed?"

"I understand your explanations well enough," replied Mrs. Brace. "But how is it possible for Lord Florimel to espouse a lady without previously becoming acquainted with her name? The officiating clergyman must know it—it must likewise appear in the special license——"

"Not at all, madam," interrupted Rao. "A feigned name may be used for the purpose—and the marriage is not invalidated thereby. To-morrow morning I shall procure the license for Lord Florimel; and a portion of the services required at your hands is to secure the attendance of some clergyman who in consideration of a handsome fee will do what he is told without asking any questions."

"Yes—I am acquainted with a minister who will answer the purpose in all respects," said Mrs. Brace, after a few moments' reflection.

"Lord Florimel was certain that you would not be at a loss in this matter," remarked the sable youth. "And now, madam, if you will undertake to secure the attendance of a clergyman at nine o'clock to-morrow evening, the remainder of the assistance required at your hands is comparatively nothing: for all you will have to do is to place a suite of apartments in your *other* house at Lord Florimel's disposal—I mean in your establishment that looks upon Saint James's Square——"

"Ah! I see that his lordship has been tolerably explicit with you relative to my houses and so forth," observed Mrs. Brace, once more smiling with the archness and gaiety of happier times.

"Yes, madam—I know all about your establishment and yourself," said Rao: and the glance which he threw upon the milliner seemed to flash with the vividness of lightning. "But enough on that head," he instantaneously added. "I think that we now understand each other relative to the business——"

But Rao suddenly stopped short: for Mrs. Brace started nervously from her seat as a ring at the street-door bell met her ears.

"Excuse my absence for a few moments," she said, immediately recovering herself. "The servants are all gone to bed, and I must answer that summons——"

"Do not hurry yourself, madam, on my account," interrupted Rao.

Mrs. Brace smiled an acknowledgment of the youth's courtesy, and then hastily quitted the room.

CHAPTER CCIV.

THE EAVES-DROPPER.

"How changed is this woman — how fearfully altered!" said the black page to himself, the instant that he was alone. "And how nervously she started when the tinkling of the bell reached her ears! Ah! crime—crime has done all this! Yes—it is clear as day-light: guilt has changed her thus—and guilt inspires her with sudden terrors! Care alone would be incapable of producing these effects upon the person and the mind of such a woman! Oh! if I could but penetrate into *her* secrets also and wreak a revenge as terrible as that which will soon overtake *him*——"

Then suddenly stopping short in his musings, Rao rose from his seat—glided noiselessly to the parlour-door—and listened with a breathless attention.

For it had struck him that he not only heard the footsteps of several persons traversing the passage outside, but likewise that the hissing of the word "Hush!" had mingled with the other sounds. And therefore was it that he had suddenly become an eaves-dropper; and he now distinctly heard Mrs. Brace say in a whispered tone of entreaty, "Come into this room—and for heaven's sake speak not until——"

The remainder of the sentence was lost to Rao's ear.

"Until you are all alone together and the door is carefully shut, I suppose?" he however said to himself, thus finishing in imagination the earnest appeal which the milliner had addressed to the persons whom she had just admitted into the house.

But Rao suddenly returned to his seat: for his ear had caught the rustle of a silk gown and the tread of footsteps approaching the parlour door. Nor was he mistaken: for the milliner almost immediately re-appeared;—and the rapid glance which the black page threw upon her, showed him that she was labouring under a profound agitation, despite of all her efforts to conceal it.

"My young friend," said Mrs. Brace, in a tone penetrated with the nervousness of mingled terror and vexation,—"a person has just stepped in upon some very important business—and I was thinking that if you could return in the morning——"

"Madam," interrupted the sable youth, "do not put yourself out of the way on my account. Transact your business—and I will cheerfully await your pleasure, even if it be an hour or two hours. But we *must* make our arrangements definitively this night, inasmuch as I shall be fully engaged to-morrow until the moment when my presence will be needed here."

"Then if you have no objection to wait a little," said Mrs. Brace, "I will rejoin you in as short a time as possible. Perhaps you will take some refreshment——"

"Nothing, I thank you, madam," said Rao. "This book, he added, as he took up a small volume of poems from a side-table, "will amuse me until you return."

Mrs. Brace accordingly withdrew once more: and the instant that she had quitted the room, Rao flung down the book and glided back to his post at the door.

"Ah! I know which apartment she has entered," he said to himself: "I can tell by the direction that her footsteps took. Oh! is not every nook and corner of this accursed dwelling as familiar to me as if

HANNAH LIGHTFOOT.

I had been brought up in it from my infancy? But I will be bold—I will be adventurous at all risks and at any hazards: for there is something like a presentiment which prompts me to play the eaves-dropper this night."

And having thus hastily mused within himself, Rao opened the door so noiselessly that it emitted not even a sound which he could hear: and, stealthily traversing the passage, he approached the door of the apartment which he believed Mrs. Brace to have entered.

But we must now leave the sable page outside that room, while we narrate what is passing within it.

The Kinchin-Grand, Carrotty Poll, and the Gallows' Widow were really the persons whom Mrs. Brace had introduced thither: and we shall now behold her standing all ghastly and trembling in their presence—for she not only knew that they came for the purposes of extortion, but also that her very life was in their hands.

"Well, ma'am," said the Kinchin-Grand, the moment she returned to the apartment after arranging with Rao that he was to wait for her in the parlour,—"you see that these women here insisted on my keeping 'em company; and as I was raythor anxious to have a special introduction to a lady of your fashion and quality, I wasn't sorry to have sich an opportunity of paying my respects to you."

"What do you require of me?" asked Mrs. Brace, in a hollow tone, as she bent her troubled looks first upon Elizabeth Marks and then upon Carrotty Poll, without taking any notice of their male companion.

"I suppose, ma'am, that you can understand the nature of our business," said the Big Beggarman's daughter. "We are not accustomed to make calls of ceremony and leave our cards at gentlemen's or ladies' houses: but whenever and wherever we do pay visits, it is for a particular purpose."

"Did I not recompense you handsomely some time ago?" observed Mrs. Brace, now sinking upon a seat: "and had I not a right to suppose that you would leave me unmolested in future?"

"We won't argue the point," said the Gallows' Widow, coldly: "because it is not worth while. But we will at once explain the object of our visit."

"Go on—go on," exclaimed the milliner, hastily. "The sooner I know the worst the better. But remember that my death will do you no good——"

"Who the devil seeks your death, ma'am?" demanded the Kinchin-Grand. "For my part, I hope you'll live a thousand years——"

"Cease this jabbering, Bill," interrupted the Gallows' Widow, sternly. "We brought you with us as a protection—and not to play the part of a parrot."

"A protection?" observed Mrs. Brace. "And what made you think that you stood in need of a protection? Were you fearful that I should seek to injure you?"

"Well, madam," replied the Gallows' Widow, who hated the milliner with a rancorous bitterness, and who was therefore inwardly rejoiced at being enabled to give vent to words which she knew would cut the unhappy woman to the very soul,—"since you appear to seek an explanation on that head, I don't mind telling you that Poll Price and myself were somewhat afraid to venture here alone together any more. I mean, we thought it better and more prudent to bring our young friend with us: because there have been people who've come into this house, you know, and never gone out again. In fact, as I told you on the last occasion, it is no secret to us that Peter Grimley lies buried beneath the great flag-stone in the back-kitchen: and we've no doubt that his partner Mobbs, who disappeared so strangely and so suddenly, isn't very far off."

"My God! my God!" moaned the wretched milliner, writhing convulsively upon her seat, while her countenance was hideous and ghastly with the most frightful workings of the features. "Wherefore recapitulate all this, young woman?"

"Because you wanted to know why me and Carrotty Poll were afraid to come alone into this house," replied the Gallows' Widow. "For it is a house of murder, madam—a house of mysterious midnight assassination—a house the very air of which fills even *me* with horror!"

"Enough! enough!" exclaimed the milliner, covering her countenance with her hands. "Spare me—spare me, I beseech you—and tell me the business that has brought you hither now?"

"Well, give us your attention," observed the Gallows' Widow, her cold-blooded ferocity now sated with the amount of vengeance which her words had visibly inflicted upon the unhappy Mrs. Brace.

"Proceed, proceed," exclaimed the latter: and the withdrawal of her hands from her face, revealed features so stamped with all the horrors of concious guilt, and all the excruciations of a wretchedness which no additional calamity could possibly enhance, that she looked like the corpse of one who had met a violent death and on whose cheeks some hand had plastered the vivid rouge in mockery.

"You must know, ma'am," continued the Gallows' Widow, "that a certain person who bears the name of Warren, and who is not altogether a stranger to you, will be tried in a few days——"

"I know it—I know it," murmured Mrs. Brace: "I have read it all in the newspapers."

"And Mr. Stephen Price, this young woman's father," continued Elizabeth Marks, pointing to her female companion, "will be tried along with him. Well, we are certain that they won't be put to death——"

"How are you so sure of that?" demanded the milliner in surprise, at the confidence with which the assertion was made.

"Oh! because he caught the Prince in a trap the other night," responded the Gallows' Widow; "and we compelled him to give us a written guarantee that the men's lives shall be saved. But they will be sentenced to transportation for the rest of their lives; and as me and Poll Price intend to follow them across the water, we thought it would be as well to carry out with us as much money as we can possibly raise together. So we resolved on paying you a last visit and tasting your generosity," added Elizabeth Marks, with a slight amount of irony, "for the last time."

"And how much do you require?" demanded Mrs. Brace, who had somewhat recovered her self-possession while the Gallows' Widow was giving the preceding explanations.

"We can't very well do with less than a thousand pounds," said the Gallows' Widow: "and if you will give us that sum, depend upon it you will never hear any more *from* us, whatever you may chance to hear *of* us."

"A thousand pounds!" repeated Mrs. Brace: then suddenly recollecting that Frederick Dray had more than half promised to accede to her proposal for emigration and that they might therefore leave England within a few days, she hoped to gain time by observing, "Well, I suppose I must comply with your demand: but when will you want the money?"

"Now—at once—down upon the nail—there's nothing like the present!" exclaimed the Kinchin-Grand.

"I have not a thousand pounds in the house," said Mrs. Brace: "nor anything near that sum. It will take me at least a week to raise it."

"And in the meantime you'll perhaps be off to America," observed the Gallows' Widow.

"What—why—what made you think so?" stammered the milliner, all in a moment becoming dreadfully confused.

"Ah! then the random remark which I let drop, has struck home?" said Elizabeth Marks. "Mrs. Brace, we shall not leave this house until you have produced the thousand pounds!"

The whole of the preceding conversation had been overheard by Rao who was posted outside the door with his ear glued to the key-hole: but he now deemed it better to retire, inasmuch as matters appeared to be drawing to a crisis, and it was probable that the milliner would have to repair to some other room in order to procure the wherewith to satisfy her extortionate visitors. Rao accordingly beat a retreat to the parlour, where he resumed his seat and took up the volume which he had declared should engage his attention during Mrs. Brace's absence.

Scarcely had he thus settled himself, when the milliner re-appeared; and having apologised for

keeping him waiting so long, she opened a writing-desk—took something out of it—and then quitted the parlour once more, but with an intimation that she should return again in a few minutes. The sable page did not choose to follow her upon this occasion: he had no difficulty in understanding that, yielding to the threats of the extortioners, she had come to fetch the requisite amount from her desk to appease their rapacity;—and he had already gleaned *enough* to place the wretched woman completely in his power.

"I knew that she was tortured by a sense of guilt and its accompanying fears," said Rao to himself: "but such guilt as that—my God! such guilt—who would have expected it?"

And then, with his eyes still fixed upon the volume which he held in his hand, he fell into a profound reverie,—from which he was startled by the return of Mrs. Brace to the parlour.

"I have a thousand apologies to offer you, my young friend," she observed, in a voice which she vainly endeavoured to divest of the accents of deep oppression that penetrated it: "but the person who called, and who is an excellent customer of mine," she added, with a sickly attempt at a smile, "kept me talking longer than I had expected."

"Well, madam," observed Rao, without turning his head, "I sincerely wish you a hundred of such customers—and I can assure you that I should not grow impatient while you were attending to them all."

"Thank you for your kindness," said Mrs. Brace: and as she returned to her seat, she endeavoured to conceal a sob under a short cough.

"Now, I think we have but little more to say to each other, after all," continued the black page. "You fully comprehend, madam, the services and the assistance that are required at your hands: namely, a complaisant parson who will ask no questions and even perform the marriage ceremony in the dark if needs be—and a suite of apartments in your *other* establishment."

"Your noble master shall be fully accommodated in every way," returned Mrs. Brace. "At nine o'clock to-morrow evening, all the arrangements shall be completed so far as I am concerned."

"Then I will not intrude longer upon your time, madam," said Rao, rising from his seat: "for it is already late."

The black page accordingly took his departure;—and the milliner was left alone to reflect upon all that had occurred during the last hour.

CHAPTER CCV.

PLANS AND INTRIGUES.

At about eight o'clock on the following evening Rao made his appearance again at Mrs. Brace's house; and this time he carried a large band-box in his hand. The milliner informed him that she had secured the services of a clergyman, who would be in attendance soon after nine; and Rao then requested her to conduct him to the suite of apartments which she had prepared for the reception of the bridal party. Mrs. Brace accordingly led the black page into the house which looked into St. James's Square; and escorting him through the saloons and bed-chambers upon the first and second floors, she told him that any or all of those apartments were at the service of Lord Florimel.

"Good!" observed Rao. "And now, madam, you will be kind enough to inform your domestics that they need not trouble themselves to answer any knock or ring at the front-door, as I will undertake that duty myself."

"Be it so," said Mrs. Brace. "And if you require my assistance for any purpose, you can come to me in the parlour where you have already seen me."

"Your services will be needed to give away the bride, madam," said Rao: "but I will fetch you at the proper moment—or else request the clergyman to do so. Perhaps you will hold yourself in readiness about half-past nine o'clock?"

"Certainly—with much pleasure," responded the milliner.

"One word more, madam," added Rao: then, in a solemn and mysterious tone, he said, "The ceremony will take place in *the dark*, for reasons which I cannot explain now. But I give you this warning, in order that you may not be taken by surprise."

"I am glad that you have mentioned the subject," observed Mrs. Brace, "for it otherwise would have produced a disagreeable impression on my mind."

The milliner then quitted Rao, who, the moment he was alone, proceeded to make a close inspection of the various apartments; and having selected those which he deemed most suitable, he took possession of a bed-chamber for his own accommodation. There he opened the band-box which he had brought with him: and taking out a white dress, a beautiful veil, and all the usual appurtenances to the complete apparel of a bride, he placed them carefully upon the bed. Then, surveying them with an indescribable earnestness, Rao murmured the monosyllables, "At last!"—and an expression of mingled triumph and ferocious vindictiveness swept over his countenance.

Scarcely had his features settled down into their natural placidity, when a double knock at the front-door echoed through the house; and the sable page hurried to answer the summons. The arrival was Lord Florimel, who came in a post-chaise which had brought him direct from Dover. He was unattended by any of his valets, having travelled alone in order that his movements might remain unknown and his proceedings unobserved by those whose prying curiosity he was so anxious to avoid. Rao lifted his lordship's portmanteau into the hall—paid the postilions and dismissed the vehicle—and then escorted his noble master to a bed-chamber.

"Are all the arrangements completed, Rao?" inquired the young nobleman, who was evidently labouring under much agitation and excitement mingled with a painful nervousness.

"All—everything, my lord," was the answer.

"Then hasten and assist me to dress, Rao," said Florimel. "The roads were dusty; and as the day was hot I was compelled to have the windows of the post-chaise open. Put me out clean linen and such apparel as becomes a bridegroom," he added, endeavouring to speak cheerfully: but the last words of his sentence were rendered tremulous with a sigh that rose from his breast and almost deepened into a sob.

"Does not your lordship feel well?" inquired

Rao, in a tone expressive of an affectionate sympathy.

"Yes—no—or rather I should say that I scarcely know how I *do* feel, my boy," answered the young nobleman. "It seems to me as if I were about to take a very desperate step: and now that the supreme moment draws near, I ask myself a thousand different questions in a minute—I am tortured by anxieties strangely blending with fond hopes and glowing thoughts of bliss——"

"But your lordship loves this lady whom you are about to espouse?" said Rao, looking from beneath his darkly fringed lids with a strange intentness at his noble master, though all the while affecting to be busied in arranging upon the bed the clean linen and other apparel which he was taking from the valise.

"I love her—yes, I love her—I have already told you so, boy, when I took you into my confidence," exclaimed Florimel, with all the pettishness of one who is agitated by a thousand conflicting ideas and antagonistic feelings. "And yet—and yet," he added in a more measured tone, "I could almost have wished that it were Pauline Clarendon to whom I am about to bind myself for ever! You are certain, boy," cried the nobleman, turning with feverish abruptness towards the sable page, "that the intelligence you gave me relative to Pauline was correct?"

"I merely told your lordship what I had read in a newspaper ten days ago, when you sent me up to London from Dover in order to transact a little business for your lordship," said Rao. "On rejoining your lordship again at Dover, I deemed it my duty to inform you that I had read of Miss Clarendon's marriage in the paper——"

"Ah! enough—enough!" ejaculated Florimel, in a tone of bitterness. "I deserved to lose her! Yes—I deserved it! Nevertheless, had she remained single—had she continued to love me—and had I been assured that it was only necessary for us to meet in order to be reconciled, I do not think that my Unknown would have sustained her empire over me. But it is done—Pauline is another's," added the young nobleman, in a low musing tone: "and I may as well save my peerage and my fortune by giving my hand to this mysterious being who promises to raise me above all the perils and all the difficulties which now environ me.

Rao fixed his eyes intently upon his noble master as he thus mused in an audible tone; and again did that singular expression of triumph and vindictiveness sweep rapidly over the features of the sable page. 'Twas but as the shadow which the wing of a bird might throw in its flight—as transitory and as evanescent:—and that countenance resumed its placidity again!

Another double knock now echoed through the house:—and Florimel started nervously as he exclaimed, "'Tis she!"

Rao instantaneously quitted the room and descended the stairs to open the street door. The Unknown, closely veiled, alighted from a hackney-coach, which immediately drove away. She too came unattended and alone; and in her hand she carried a large band-box, which Rao took from her and bore into the hall. Then, without saying a single word, he conducted her up stairs to a chamber, on the threshold of which he paused.

"If you require female attendance, madam," he said, "Mrs. Brace—the mistress of the house—will cheerfully wait upon you."

"No—I can manage by myself, Rao," returned the lady, in that musical voice which was endowed with such syren charms: and, taking the band-box from the sable page, she closed the door of the apartment.

Rao now returned to his master, who inquired anxiously if it were the Unknown that had just arrived. The response was of course in the affirmative;—and Lord Florimel heaved a profound sigh, but said nothing more.

In about twenty minutes his toilette was completed; and Rao then conducted him to the saloon where the ceremony was to take place.

"You have procured the special license, boy?" said Florimel, as he flung himself upon a sofa.

"Here it is, my lord," answered the page, drawing the paper from his pocket.

"What name have you had filled in for the bride?" demanded the nobleman.

"Some fictitious one, of course, as I did not know the real one, my lord," replied Rao: "I gave the first that came into my head—but I really for. get what it was at this moment——"

The page was interrupted by another knock at the front door: and thrusting back the special license into his pocket, he hastened to answer this third summons. But as he descended the stairs, he said to himself, "The interruption was fortunate—and now by a little good management I shall avoid any farther questioning relative to this license."

Upon opening the front door, Rao beheld an elderly man whose clerical style of dress at once convinced him that this was the accommodating parson mentioned by Mrs. Brace. A certain sanctimoniousness of look and a rubicund countenance denoted the admixture of hypocrisy and dissipation which constituted the character of the man; and Rao perceived at a glance that he was in every way a suitable instrument for his purposes.

"One word with you, reverend sir," whispered the youth, as he led the clergyman into a parlour opening from the hall: then, closing the door of the room, he said, "Will you favour me with your name?"

"Tobias Colwell," was the response: "Tobias Colwell, at the service of whomsoever I have been invited hither to aid or assist——"

"Well, reverend sir," interrupted Rao, "I presume that Mrs. Brace has already given you some idea of the nature of the business for which your presence is needed?"

"To perform the marriage ceremony for a noble lord and some lady whom he loves—is it not so?" said Mr. Tobias Colwell.

"Precisely," answered Rao. "And you must be pleased to look upon me as the master of the ceremonies, having full power to regulate the same. As a proof of this, I beg to tender your reverence a fee, which shall be doubled if you implicitly and accurately follow out the instructions which I am about to give you:"—and the sable youth counted twenty sovereigns into the parson's hand.

"You can command my services in any way," observed Mr. Colwell, his rubicund countenance growing brighter than even the gold that he fingered with such ineffable pleasure. "Be it a

marriage—a baptism—a burial—a christening—or a churching, it is all the same: I am your man!"

"I was sure of it," exclaimed Rao. "And now take this special license," he continued, producing the paper. "You will see that Lord Florimel is one of the parties, and a lady whose name is also given is the other. But you must avoid any mention of the lady's name until *after* the knot shall have been indissolubly tied; and should it be necessary to breathe that name *during* any portion of the ceremony, you must slur over it in such a manner that it may not meet Lord Florimel's ears. Do you comprehend me? and will you act precisely as I require?"

"*Yes*, to both questions," answered Mr. Colwell. "Anything else?"

"I see that we shall have no difficulty in coming to an understanding with each other," observed Rao. "There is one point more—which is, *that the ceremony must take place in the dark?*"

"I have no objection," replied the reverend gentleman, who did not forget the additional fee which had been promised: "and as for the prayers, I can repeat them as well without a book as with one."

"Good!" exclaimed Rao: "and now please to attend to one more point upon which I must instruct you. Mrs. Brace has undertaken to give the bride away: but her presence is not needed until everything is in readiness for the ceremony to commence. Therefore the moment the bride enters the apartment whither you will be shortly led, you must hasten and fetch Mrs. Brace. She is already aware that the proceedings will be conducted in the mystery and depth of utter darkness; and hence there is no necessity for any farther explanation on that head. Do you comprehend me?"

"It is impossible to mistake instructions so precise and intelligible," said the parson. "But assuredly this is the most mysterious affair——"

"Are you afraid of it? Do you wish to retreat?" demanded Rao, impatiently.

"What! with twenty guineas in hand, and twenty more in prospective," exclaimed Mr. Colwell. "Not I!"

"Well and good!" said Rao, in a tone of satisfaction. "And now I must request you, reverend sir, to be pleased to remain here for a few minutes. There is wine upon the side-board."

"I see it," interrupted the clergyman, his mouth watering; "and I know that Mrs. Brace's wine is excellent. You need not, therefore, be in any hurry—as with that bottle of Port I can manage to while away half-an-hour or so agreeably enough."

Rao now quitted the parson, and hastened back to his noble master in the drawing-room.

"The clergyman is come, my lord," said the page. "But I am instructed to convey to you an earnest prayer from the unknown lady who is about to become your lordship's bride. It is the last scene in the drama of mystery which now approaches its *denouement*."

"Whatever be the lady's request, I shall of course agree to it," returned Lord Florimel.

"The bridal veil, my lord," continued Rao, "will not conceal that countenance which must be hidden until the nuptial knot shall have been tied; and, therefore, the Unknown solicits your lordship to allow the ceremony to take place in the dark. I have spoken to the clergyman upon the subject, and he is agreeable."

"Then I can assuredly offer no objection," exclaimed Lord Florimel. "But, Oh! how happy shall I be when all this mystery is at an end. What can it mean?—what purpose can it serve?"

"I think that I can guess, my lord," said Rao, in a deliberative tone. "The lady's vanity will be flattered by the circumstance that her winning manners, the charms of her conversation, and all the myriad blandishments which she has brought to bear upon your lordship's heart, should have succeeded in maintaining their empire until the very last, without the necessity of revealing to your lordship her countenance, her name, and her rank: and then she will experience all the exultation of a woman's pride in displaying to your lordship's eyes a glory of beauty such as even in your fondest hopes and your brightest dreams your imagination has never pictured."

"Think you, Rao, that these are her motives?" demanded Florimel, every vein tingling with the fervour thus excited in his whole being.

"I am sure of it my lord," returned the sable youth. "And I must inform your lordship that I just now caught a glimpse of the lady's countenance as she opened her chamber-door and stopped me as I was passing——"

"Oh! is it possible that you have seen her face, Rao?" exclaimed the young nobleman, in a perfect enthusiasm of joyous expectation, mingled with a delicious suspense.

"Yes, my lord," replied the youth. "The veil caught in the latch and was drawn aside for a moment——"

"And is she really so very, very beautiful?" demanded Gabriel, in a tone of feverish impatience, which was however of no unpleasurable nature.

"The world has never before seen such charms, my lord," responded the page. "I was struck with wonder and amazement at the splendour of that glorious beauty of which I obtained so brief a glimpse. Ah! my lord, you will be well rewarded for your blind devotion to that superb creature!"

"Rao, you have ravished me—you have enchanted all my senses—you have steeped me in a fount of ecstatic bliss!" cried the young nobleman, in a voice full of enthusiastic fervour. "Oh! hasten and let the ceremony proceed—and assure my beauteous Unknown that she has but to dictate her will in all things, to render me her willing slave."

"Then I shall extinguish the lights, my lord," said Rao; "and your lordship must consent to remain in darkness until the lady shall have completed her bridal toilette."

"Do so—do whatever you choose—whatever *she* ordains, Rao!" exclaimed the infatuated nobleman, rendered almost delirious with the ardour of hope and the sense of indescribable bliss.

The black page accordingly put out the candles; and the room was involved in total darkness.

"I shall now introduce the minister, my lord," observed Rao.

Thus speaking he quitted the apartment and returned to the parlour where he had left Mr. Tobias Colwell.

"Now, reverend sir," he said, "you will have the goodness to follow me to the apartment where the ceremony is to take place. Lord Florimel is

there—and the lights are already extinguished. Should his lordship say a word to you relative to the marriage-license, you will have the kindness to answer that you have it in your pocket—but by no means mention the lady's name figuring therein."

"I shall fulfil your instructions with all due fidelity," returned the reverend gentleman.

Rao then proceeded to escort him to the apartment where Lord Florimel was waiting with such thrilling impatience and ecstatic hope; and having thus far perfected his arrangements and combined his plans, the sable page repaired to the chamber of the Unknown.

CHAPTER CCVI.

THE RIVAL.

Rao knocked gently, but in a determined manner; and the mysterious lady, opening the door to a little distance, but remaining concealed behind it, said, "Is that you, boy?"

"It is, madam," was the reply: "and I must speak to you immediately."

"Has anything unpleasant occurred?" demanded the Unknown, in an agitated and nervous voice.

"No, madam—nothing new, at all events," responded Rao. "But you will permit me to enter, as it is of the utmost importance I should have a few words with you."

"But I am not half dressed, Rao," said the lady, in a tremulous whisper.

"It matters not, madam," was the resolute rejoinder: "my business admits of no delay."

"Wait one instant, then," answered the Unknown: and she closed the door.

In about a minute she opened it again; and Rao passed into the chamber, carefully shutting the door behind him.

The Unknown, who had now nearly completed her toilette, appeared before him closely veiled and with a shawl thrown negligently over her shoulders, but scarcely concealing the full and swelling globes which gave such rich luxuriance to her splendid bust.

"Now, madam," said Rao, speaking with an accent of firm decision and casting upon the lady a look that seemed to penetrate her veil and which carried a troubled sensation into the very inmost recesses of her soul,—"we have not many minutes to converse, and not a moment to waste in expostulation, recrimination, or explanation."

"What mean you, good youth?" asked the Unknow, her musical voice vibrating like the chord of a harp during the few moments that follow immediately after the player's finger has been withdrawn.

"I mean, madam," replied Rao, his looks becoming more and more mysteriously alarming, "that I am here to dictate certain terms, and to prove to you that I have the power of enforcing obedience."

"Ah! is it possible that you meditate treachery, Rao?" exclaimed the Unknown, now trembling visibly from head to foot, and clasping her fair hands entreatingly.

"I am about to behold the consummation of the plans which I have cherished for weeks past, and for which your conduct towards Lord Florimel not only furnished the idea but also the means of carrying it into execution. Madam," added Rao, in a voice of mingled solemnity and imperiousness, "you must abandon all hope of espousing him whom you love so madly—so passionately—so insanely!"

"My God! abandon the only hope of happiness!" cried the lady, in a voice of bitter lamentation. "No—no: it cannot be, Rao—it cannot be! You are jesting—you would not be so cruel! Besides, by what right do you interfere?—and what power do you presume to exercise over me?"

"My right, madam, is that of vengeance," was the response, deeply accentuated; "and my power consists in knowing who you are and being able to tear away the veil that conceals your lascivious life beneath the imposture of a tremendous hypocrisy!"

"O God! is it possible?" murmured the lady, sinking down upon a chair in a state of utter annihilation.

"And now, madam," continued the implacable Rao, "you will have the kindness to remain a prisoner in this room until after the ceremony, when you will be at liberty to depart. And as for your secret—I promise that it shall be safe, even with regard to Lord Florimel himself."

"The ceremony, you say?" exclaimed the Unknown, springing wildly from her seat—and Rao could observe the rapid heavings and fallings of the lady's bosom. "But how is the ceremony to take place, if I am excluded?—is there a rival—has Pauline Clarendon regained her influence——"

"There is a rival, madam—but it is not she whose name you have just mentioned," answered Rao.

"Then who is she, boy?" demanded the Unknown, fearfully excited with a thousand maddening, conflicting, wildering emotions and ideas. "Speak!—who is she?"

"I!" ejaculated the page: and tearing open the closely buttoned frock coat at the same instant, the mysterious being revealed the white bosom of a female.

"Heavens! what does this mean?" cried the Unknown, amazement now absorbing all other feelings. "Who are you?—wherefore this disguise?—why that dark hue upon the face and hands?"

"The tale is too long to tell, even if I were inclined to narrate it," said the young woman. "Suffice it for me to observe that in becoming the wife of Lord Florimel, as I assuredly shall within the next half-hour, I am but wreaking a long cherished vengeance."

"This is horrible—detestable—and shall not be!" exclaimed the Unknown, with accents of desperation. "Whatever be the risk——"

"You will not run it!" cried Rao. "Hark, madam—a word in your ear! Let me tell you who you are——"

And the disguised female, whom we must still call Rao for the present, whispered something in a low tone.

"Yes—yes—you know me!" exclaimed the syren-charmer, in a voice of bitter vexation and her whole form trembling with rage and disappointment. "But I defy your threats—I defy you to prove aught of that lascivious life to which you alluded! Woman, whoever you may be—I accept

you as a rival—and again do I defy you!" added the Unknown, goaded to desperation.

"Ah! madam—or rather, my lady," said Rao, in a voice of mingled sardonism and triumph, "you will not repeat your defiance, when I tell you that the boudoir of love, of darkness, and of mystery is no secret to me! For I have been there—yes, been there, when you clasped the infatuated young nobleman in your arms and made him the partner of your frantic pleasures."

"No—no—'tis false!—'tis an invention—a calumny—a foul calumny on your part!" cried the Unknown, quivering with emotions of terrible rage, and maddening shame, and burning hatred.

"'Tis true, my lady—'tis true!" cried Rao: then drawing forth something from her pocket, the disguised female said, "This piece of drapery matches with that in the boudoir of love and mystery!"

"Ah! I am ruined—I am crushed—I am undone!" moaned the wretched woman whose secret deeds had thus so unaccountably come to the knowledge of a stranger. "But you will not expose me—you will not hold me up to the shame, and scorn, and indignation of the world——"

"No: such is not my intention—nor does it in any way suit my interests to injure you by such means," replied Rao. "Your ladyship may rest assured and tranquillise yourself on that head! But my time is precious: and I have only now to ask whether your ladyship will remain quietly here until I choose to release you?"

"There is no alternative," murmured the wretched Unknown, falling upon a seat and wringing her hands in all the bitterness of an indescribable anguish.

But Rao, remorseless and implacable, heeded not her grief; and hastening from the room, the mysterious being closed and locked the door, taking the key away with her.

She then hurried to the chamber which she had appropriated to her own use;—and taking a small phial from her pocket, she poured its contents into a basin of water. Then stripping off her page's raiment, she washed her face, neck, and hands with the water containing the chemical fluid;—and the flesh which was previously of a sable dye, became white—or rather of a natural brunette complexion. Pure, clear, and beautiful was this complexion now;—and upon the cheeks was enough of the carnation's tint to enhance the charming aspect of the lovely being who had so long concealed her European fairness beneath the artificial semblance of an oriental skin.

And now, having cast a look of mingled joy and triumph into the mirror which reflected the lovely countenance of the brunette, she proceeded with marvellous haste to don the bridal raiment that she had prepared. The hair, of such silken fineness, was speedily arranged in the manner becoming her sex: then silk stockings and satin shoes displaced the boots that had hitherto imprisoned the well-shaped legs and concealed the admirable symmetry of the ankles;—and when she had put on the white nuptial robe, she placed a wreath of white roses on her hair and threw the snowy veil over her head.

Never was marriage-toilette performed with such expedition—and yet not a sign of this precipitation was visible in her appearance when the process was completed. Charming she was—and charming she looked,—save, perhaps, that there was a slight air of masculine decision and amazonian firmness in her looks, which somewhat marred the soft sensibility and winning grace peculiar to her sex.

And now, with rapid footsteps she glided along the passage to the stairs, which she descended with equal speed; and, after pausing for a moment at the door of the saloon, as if to summon all her presence of mind and courage for the final scene, she passed into the room.

The interior was pitch dark: but the rustling of her dress following immediately upon the opening and shutting of the door, made Florimel aware of the presence of *the bride*—and he hurried to meet her. Their hands met—and he retained her's in his grasp, as he whispered in a tone of profound tenderness, "A few minutes more, and you will be mine!"

"Yes, my well-beloved Gabriel," she murmured, in a voice so low that he could not possibly observe in it anything different from that of the Unknown.

"Now, reverend sir," exclaimed Gabriel, leading his fair companion towards the vicinage of the table, where he had previously noticed that footstools were placed: "be pleased to hasten and fetch Mrs. Brase, since you have told me that she has consented to bestow my bride upon me."

But the clergyman, in pursuance of the instructions so precisely given to him by Rao, was already hurrying to leave the room as Florimel thus spoke: and the nobleman was now left alone with her who had so strangely and adventurously usurped the place of the syren-charmer.

The circumstances in which Rao now found herself suddenly placed, were awkward to a degree. She had nevertheless foreseen them, and was prepared how to act: for dangerous as her position now was, and immense as she knew the risk of detection now to be, it was impossible for her to have avoided this dilemma by any other mode of directing the progress of her deeply-ramified intrigue.

But of what nature was the peril which now menaced her with discovery and the consequent explosion of her scheme? The reader will remember that the Unknown was tall and endowed with charms voluptuously luxuriant and full—whereas Rao was short in stature and slightly formed. If, then, Lord Florimel should seize her in his arms or otherwise attempt to caress her during the temporary absence of the clergyman, he could scarcely help discovering the cheat that was being practised upon him. Nor was this all: for should Rao be compelled to speak at any great length, there was the additional chance of her voice betraying the fact that she was *not* the syren-unknown.

Therefore, the instant that the clergyman had quitted the room, Rao said in a hasty whisper, "I have forgotten something: excuse me one moment, dearest Gabriel!"—and, abandoning his hand, she sped to the door. This she opened—made her dress rustle, as if she were passing out—and then closed the door again. But she did not leave the apartment at all: on the contrary, she stood motionless and breathless as a statue in the close vicinage of that door.

"Adorable creature!" exclaimed Florimel, the instant he fancied that he was alone: "how ardently I long to gaze upon that countenance which

Rao assures me is so gloriously handsome! But I was always convinced that thou art of a rare beauty: I never doubted that thy features were as faultless as thy form is superb! And now—oh! now the moment approaches for elucidating all that is dark and mysterious in thee! I shall behold thy countenance and learn thy name: thy rank and position will be revealed to me—and from all thou hast at different times told me, I need not fear that the alliance will be one for which I shall have to blush. Oh! what an empire hast thou gained over my heart—inscrutable, incomprehensible! Thou more than woman—thou goddess of a myriad fascinations—who canst thou be? and whence dost thou derive the power of saving my peerage and my fortunes from the grasp of the claimant that has sprung up? But in a few minutes I shall know all this;—and there is an elysian ecstacy in the very suspense that I now feel—a blissful charm in the uncertainty that envelopes me as profoundly as does the darkness of this room."

Thus mused aloud the enthusiastic and infatuated young nobleman, until the door suddenly opened and the clergyman re-entered, escorting Mrs. Brace. Almost immediately afterwards Rao opened the door again—made her muslin robe rustle—and then closed the door promptly,—so that the effect produced was really just the same as if she had actually returned to the apartment.

Again was Lord Florimel by her side in a moment—and again was her hand locked in his own. With hasty steps they felt their way back to the vicinage of the table, where they knelt down upon the foot-stools.

The ceremony then commenced immediately: and there—in the midst of the utter darkness which prevailed—did the accommodating clergyman begin to recite the service for this most strange, most mysterious, and most romantic marriage.

CHAPTER CCVII.

THE INVALID.

We must now return to Frederick Dray, who, as the reader will recollect, was labouring under a severe indisposition when he retired to rest on the preceding night. He had slept with his wonted soundness until a late hour in the morning; and his first feelings, on awaking, were such as to induce him to believe that his illness had passed away. He however resolved to take his breakfast in bed; and Mrs. Brace accordingly carried it up to him as soon as she had prepared it.

But the moment he placed the tea-cup to his lips, he experienced such a sudden nausea and sickness at the stomach, attended by an equally abrupt access of head-ache, that he was compelled to decline taking any refreshment; and imagining that he had either eaten something which had disagreed with him, or that it was a bilious attack under which he was suffering, he consented to allow the milliner to procure some medicine. This he took; and he likewise determined to remain in bed the whole day.

The milliner duly recounted to him all that had occurred on the previous evening,—how the extortioners had paid another visit to her house and compelled her to give them a thousand pounds—and how Lord Florimel's page had called for the purpose of making those arrangements with which the reader is already acquainted, and which Mrs. Brace succinctly explained to her paramour. The visit of the Kinchin-Grand and his two female companions irritated and annoyed Frederick Dray to a much greater degree than the purpose of Rao's call pleased him on the other hand—inasmuch as the latter business did not promise to be so productive as the former one had proved detrimental to the state of the milliner's finances. His vexation was therefore only mitigated and not altogether appeased by the Florimel-affair;—and throughout the day he continued to toss about uneasily in his bed, a prey to a mental irritability which appeared to aggravate his physical indisposition. Towards evening, however, he grew somewhat more calm, and at length sank off into a profound slumber—a circumstance which permitted Mrs. Brace ample leisure to make the arrangements agreed upon between herself and Rao.

When Frederick Dray awoke again, he found a light burning on a table by his bed-side. He called for the milliner. but no one answered him. He raised himself in the couch—and fell back on the pillow, under the influence of the most torturing sensations. The nausea in the stomach was now intolerable to a degree—his head ached with a positive violence—and a general feeling of uneasiness pervaded his whole system. He experienced a burning thirst; and, reaching out his hand, he filled a tumbler with toast-and-water which had been placed upon the night-table. But so dreadfully did his heart appear to heave against the cooling beverage, that scarcely had he placed it to his lips when an irresistible impulse prompted him to fling away the glass from his hand, as if a sudden spasm had shaken his arm with a violent convulsion.

"What the deuce can be the matter with me?" he murmured in a ferocious tone to himself, shuddering all over at the same time, though without knowing why—and indeed without as yet entertaining the slightest suspicion of the awful truth.

The thirst which he experienced was now intolerable: but he loathed the idea of making another attempt to stay it with the toast-and-water. It struck him that some tea would now do him good: and he likewise fancied that he ought to take a little sustenance. For he had eaten nothing the entire day;—and he reasoned himself into the belief that the nausea which he felt at the stomach was nothing more than faintness for want of food.

He called out again for the milliner: but no answer was returned. He reached the bell-rope—and it happened that the impatient jerk which he gave the cord, detached it from the wire without ringing the bell.

"Perdition!" he exclaimed, now actually foaming at the mouth with rage. "Am I to be left here to perish like a dog?"

Then all in a moment the thought flashed to his mind that Mrs. Brace, taking advantage of his illness, had abandoned him and fled from the metropolis.

"Yes—by heaven! it must be so," he cried

aloud, in a savage tone, and with a sort of subdued howl like that of a wild beast. "She has long had a hankering to bolt to America—and I remember that last night she talked a good deal about it. Perhaps, after all, those stories concerning the Gallows' Widow's party and the visit of Lord Florimel's page, were only pure inventions—damnable lies, in fact—to throw me the more completely off my guard and make me think that in the first place her finances were utterly beggared, and in the second place that she had plenty of business on hand at the moment to occupy her attention. Yes—yes—I see it all! The wretch has bolted! And who knows," added Frederick Dray, another strong spasm shaking his entire form with convulsive violence, "that she has not poisoned me? By heaven! I feel as if I was poisoned. This nausea—this head-ache—these uneasy sensations——Oh! the vile woman, she has poisoned me!"

Then, after arriving at this horrible conclusion, the unhappy man lay motionless and silent for several minutes, pondering on the presumed treachery of his paramour and what he believed to be his own hopeless condition. But suddenly raising himself up in the bed, he resolved, if possible, to ascertain the worst;—and staggering forth from the couch, he with pain and difficulty drew on some clothing. Then, enveloping himself in a dressing-gown, he took the light in his hand and quitted the room.

Sustaining himself by the balusters, he slowly descended the stairs, his feet appearing to be as heavy as lead and all his veins tingling with uneasy sensations. The nausea at the stomach still continued; and the violence of the head-ache was unabated. Several times he thought he must sink down on the steps, or fall headlong: but he clung to the railings with one hand while he held the candle in the other;—and in this manner he at

length succeeded in gaining the bottom of the stairs.

Entering the parlour where Mrs. Brace was accustomed to sit, he found the wax candles burning upon the table—her work-box open—and a glass with some wine in it standing near. His fears that she had abandoned the house were therefore dissipated in a moment;—but the impression that she had poisoned him still remained fixed upon his mind.

Ringing the bell furiously, he asked the servant who responded to the summons where the milliner was. The domestic replied that Mrs. Brace had passed only a minute or two previously into the adjoining house.

"Very well. You may retire!" exclaimed Frederick savagely: and as soon as the servant had hurried off, amazed and frightened at the invalid's brutal manner and ghastly appearance, Dray muttered to himself, "Ill seek her out and accuse her of poisoning me, though all the lords and bridal parties in the universe have met together this night beneath our roof!"

And half maddened with the most torturing sensations of mind and body, the wretched man proceeded as quickly as he was able into the more private part of the spacious establishment. The hall was deserted—the usual attendant there having been relieved from his post on the present occasion in pursuance of the instructions given by Rao to Mrs. Brace: and without encountering a soul, did Frederick Dray drag himself up the handsome staircase.

On reaching the landing he made straight for the best drawing-room, where he expected to find Mrs. Brace and the bridal-party;—and it was just after the commencement of the marriage ceremony, as described at the close of the preceding chapter, that the door was suddenly burst open—a light streamed into the saloon, until that moment involved in such utter darkness—and the ghastly form of Frederick Dray, enveloped in the dressing gown, appeared upon the threshold.

A shriek burst from the lips of the bride—an ejaculation of anger from those of the bridegroom: the parson stopped short—and Mrs. Brace was struck speechless and motionless with dismay, her eyes fixed on the spectral-like form of her paramour.

But at the next moment a louder and wilder exclamation thrilled from the tongue of Lord Florimel, as his looks fell upon the person of the bride. For he saw at a glance that it was not his Unknown,—that she was shorter and thinner;—and tearing away the veil from her countenance, he started back in mingled amazement and affright as he instantaneously recognized the countenance of Caroline Walters!

It is impossible to describe the scene of confusion which followed. Mrs. Brace, who was likewise struck by this sudden revelation of the features of the young woman, was seized with a panic terror; and, throwing herself upon a sofa, she fainted. The Reverend Tobias Colwell, fearing that Lord Florimel had discovered some treachery and fancying that he should be punished as an accomplice, stole away from the room and beat a hurried retreat;—while Frederick Dray advanced into the apartment, holding the candle in his hand, and flinging wildly inquiring looks upon the milliner, the nobleman, and Caroline Walters.

"Good heavens! I comprehend it all!" cried the enraged Florimel, seizing the young woman violently by the wrist. "Fool that I have been!—dolt, idiot, maniac—not to have seen through the cheat ere now! Ah! and was it thus to ensnare me into a marriage with you, Caroline, that you assumed the guise of a black page?—and was that mysterious Unknown nothing more nor less than your accomplice?—or was it some deeper vengeance still which you meditated? Speak—tell me—confess everything! But, Ah! a thought strikes me," he exclaimed, his whole form quivering with the fury that filled his breast. "My papers—my documents—my valuable title-deeds—'twas you who stole them!"

"And if I took a few paltry sheets of parchment from you, my lord," said Caroline, in a cold, contemptuous tone, as she fixed her dark eyes intently upon him, "what was that theft in comparison with the foul robbery which you perpetrated in regard to me?"

"A robbery in regard to you!" cried Florimel, with blended amazement and indignation.

"Yes—you robbed me of my honour and of my happiness, my lord," returned Caroline: "you filched away my heart and trampled it under foot! You won my love and made it a curse to me instead of a blessing! Ah! my lord, you have been guilty of a flagrant infamy towards one who would have died for you: but I will yet be terribly avenged!"

And as these words fell from her lips, she turned away so suddenly and sped from the room with such a spirit-like celerity, that the door closed behind her ere Florimel had even time to advance a pace in pursuit or extend an arm to hold her back. He rushed after her: but as his fingers touched the handle of the door, he heard the key turning in the lock—and he found that he was a prisoner!

What could this mean? what aim had Caroline Walters now in view?—what further treachery was she meditating? These questions, rapid as thought alone can be, suggested themselves in a moment: but the answers were beyond all power of conjecture. Florimel stamped his foot with rage;—and turning away from the door, he beheld Mrs. Brace gasping with the pain of returning consciousness as she lay stretched upon the sofa, while Frederick Dray, still holding the candle in his hand, was contemplating her with an expression of such intense hatred and savage ferocity that the young nobleman gave utterance to an ejaculation of mingled affright and horror.

Frederick started at the cry,—started as if he had forgotten the presence of a third person altogether and was only that instant reminded of the fact: then, as his features became all in a moment convulsed with terrible and ghastly workings, he dropped the light—the room suddenly became involved in total darkness—and a hideous growling like that of a dog fell horribly upon the ears of the young nobleman and Mrs. Brace.

* * * * * *
* * * * *

In the meantime Caroline Walters, having locked the door of the saloon in the manner already described, hastened with lightning-speed to the chamber where she had made the Unknown a

captive. Opening the door, she burst in, exclaiming, "Fly, my lady—fly! if you wish to escape detection!"

"What has occurred? and what peril threatens me?" demanded the mysterious syren-charmer, who had resumed the apparel which she wore when arriving in the hackney-coach. "Oh! you have not been base enough to betray me?"

"No—no!" ejaculated Caroline, impatiently. "But my plot has failed—failed at the very instant of success! Another moment and I should have been his wife! At a future time, however, I will explain all this—but for the present let me conjure you to fly if you wish to escape discovery and exposure!"

"Thanks, young woman, for your advice," said the Unknown: and without tarrying an instant to exchange another word, or even to take the bandbox in which she had replaced the bridal dress that was not needed after all, she fled precipitately down stairs and rushed from the house.

Having thus frightened the Unknown away, so as to prevent her from meeting Lord Florimel again, at least for the present, Caroline Walters sped to the chamber which she had appropriated to her own use; and, stripping off the wedding-dress—literally tearing it in pieces from her person, in her impatience to be gone—she resumed the page's livery. But she had no time to colour her face and hands again with the sable dye, even if such a process were any longer deemed necessary: and, congratulating herself on having been able to change her apparel ere the prisoners broke loose from the saloon in which she had confined them, she took her hurried departure.

CHAPTER CCVIII.

A FRIGHTFUL TRAGEDY.

MEANTIME a horrible scene was occurring in the room where Florimel, Mrs. Brace, and Frederick Dray had remained together. For immediately upon the extinguishing of the candle as it fell on the carpet, a hideous sound, resembling the savage growling and barking of a dog, burst from the throat of Frederick Dray;—and throwing himself upon the floor, he began to rage, and toss, and writhe in fearful convulsions.

"Who is the man? and what is the matter with him?" cried Lord Florimel, horror-stricken at the dreadful scene which was thus taking place in the dark, and yet feeling ashamed to suffer the milliner to suspect that he was really alarmed.

"O God! what ails him? He has gone mad—raving mad!" exclaimed the miserable woman, not heeding the young nobleman's queries: and, groping her way to the bell-pull, she plucked at it with such violence that it snapped asunder.

"You have broken the cord?" cried Florimel, feverishly anxious to escape from a position which was by no means agreeable, and from a scene the horrors of which were aggravated by the darkness.

"Yes—but I have found the other," exclaimed Mrs. Brace, as she pulled the second bell with a little more caution. "O heavens! what is the matter with Frederick? He is mad—he is mad—and he will betray all our secrets in his delirious ravings!"

"In good faith," said Florimel, now somewhat recovering his composure as the first effect of the sudden tremor was passing away,—"I care but little what the fellow can reveal, so far as I am concerned. But it seems to me, madam, that you must have been a party to the trick which was ere now so recently carried to a successful issue in regard to myself?"

"No, no—my lord—I protest that I am innocent in that respect," exclaimed the wretched milliner. "O horror! how he raves—how he writhes—how terribly he is convulsed!—But you must not accuse me, Florimel—you must not accuse me of treachery towards you. I was deceived as well as yourself——"

"I would rather think so, after all our former friendship," interrupted the nobleman. "But in God's name ring the bell again—or I will endeavour to burst open the door——"

At that instant footsteps were heard hastily ascending the stairs—the door was thrown open—and a couple of the milliner's servants burst into the room. They had been alarmed by the violent pealing of the bell which rang down in the kitchen; and hence the coming of two footmen at the same time to answer the summons.

Lights were speedily procured—and then the appalling condition of Frederick Dray confirmed all the horrible ideas which the nobleman and Mrs. Brace had previously conceived of the agonizing nature of the throes that were convulsing him. His eyes glistened with an unnatural lustre—his countenance was ghastly—his features were distorted—all the muscles of his throat seemed painfully distended—and strong spasms, shooting every instant through his entire form, made him writhe, and tremble, and shudder in awful agonies.

"This spectacle is more than I can endure," exclaimed Florimel, dreadfully shocked and profoundly alarmed at a sight which he could not understand: and, hastening from the room, he quitted the house.

Mrs. Brace scarcely noticed his abrupt departure, so fevered was her impatience to get Dray removed at once to a bed-chamber in order that she might dismiss the footmen from further attendance on the occasion. For when that paroxysm of anguished gaspings and spasmodic convulsions in the throat, subsided for a few moments at intervals, the wretched sufferer gave vent to the wildest language and the most insane ravings, mingled with sounds that resembled the barking of a dog: and Mrs. Brace was tortured with excruciating apprehensions lest in his delirious outpourings he should betray the tremendous secret of the murders that the flag-stone in the back kitchen had hitherto so well concealed!

She accordingly hurried the footmen to raise the demoniac—for such he indeed appeared—from the carpet whereon he lay writhing in awful convulsions—and with much difficulty did they carry him to the nearest bed-chamber. There Mrs. Brace bade them leave him to her charge, as she would take the necessary care of him: but as she gave no instructions relative to the propriety of obtaining medical assistance, one of the footmen inquired whether he should not do well to fetch the doctor. The milliner dared not reply in the negative to such a demand and under such circumstances: the response was accordingly given in the

affirmative—and the two lacqueys left her alone with her rabid paramour.

He now became somewhat more tranquil; so that she was enabled to divest him of his apparel and get him into bed. Then, as a burning thirst seemed to be oppressing him, she filled a tumbler with water and presented it to his lips. But, with a hideous yell and with an awful convulsing of the whole frame, he recoiled from the mere sight of the limpid beverage; and the next moment, in a sudden paroxysm of fury, he dashed the glass from the milliner's hand.

The spectacle which the wretched sufferer now presented for some minutes was awful in the extreme. Frightful spasms in the throat appeared to menace him with strangulation—and he writhed with all the convulsive elasticity of a stricken serpent. His eyes glared—his tongue lolled out—and a white foam stood upon his upper lip. Then there was a brief interval of furious delirium, under the influence of which the miserable man besought the milliner in most piteous terms not to murder him and bury his corpse beneath the stone!

Mrs. Brace wrung her hands in desperate anguish: what was she to do?—what would be the issue of all this? The thought that she would procure a deadly poison and administer it, flashed across her brain: but the next moment she remembered that the doctor had been sent for, and he would not fail to discover the cause of the man's death! She dared not, therefore, murder him—although she longed to do so:—and now she cursed herself for having allowed him to live up to the present time!

Wildly she cast around her eyes, as if in search of something that should offer a suggestion how to act in this cruel, this torturing emergency. But no inspiration did she derive from the fevered glance which she thus flung about on all sides. Her bewilderment and perplexity increased every moment. She dared not kill him—and yet she dared not let him live. If she murdered him, the deed was sure to be discovered: if she spared him, he would reveal in his ravings enough to send her to the scaffold. With either alternative her own fate appeared to be sealed. God's revenge against murder now seemed to be approaching with inevitable certainty: her crimes were on the verge of exposure and of punishment. Fate was building up a wall of adamant around her: she could see it rising slowly, slowly—but surely, surely—on every side,—as if it were a sepulchre that was closing in upon her!

Oh! no human language can depict the torture which the wretched woman now endured for the space of ten long minutes: no power of description can convey an idea of the excruciating agony which rent her mind as she was forced to look her position in the face. *There* lay her paramour, writhing in hideous convulsions, like one possessed of a devil: and *there* stood she, with the ghastly pallor of her cheeks appearing through the rouge which, though so artistically laid on, now appeared to be naught save a mere plaster of dullest red.

At length Frederick Dray grew calmer: but, though his ravings sank into low mutterings and his convulsions subsided into a nervous restlessness, he did not seem to recover the full use of his intellect. On the contrary, his brain appeared to be wandering; and his eyes glared wildly upon the countenance of Mrs. Brace as she seated herself by the side of the couch. He did not altogether recognise her—that is to say, he had no distinct idea who she was: but he contemplated her with mingled aversion, terror, and mistrust.

He was in this condition when the door opened gently; and a domestic introduced the medical man who was in the habit of attending upon Mrs. Brace and the inmates of her establishment. As he approached the bed, the invalid's excitement was revived; and the couch shook and creaked beneath his convulsing form. Then, on the doctor's taking his hand and feeling his pulse, he shuddered and trembled like a spaniel that fears a whipping—and all the time he surveyed the medical man with a fixed look of ferocity and apprehension.

Having felt his pulse, the doctor stepped aside a few paces so as to allow the curtains of the bed to conceal him from the view of the invalid: and beckoning Mrs. Brace towards him, he put several questions to her in a low whispering voice. She explained as well as she was able the symptoms that she had observed: and when the doctor had thus gleaned from her all that she could tell him upon the subject, he said, "Do you know whether this person has ever experienced any hurt or injury of a peculiar character?"

"Not that I am aware of," returned the milliner.

"Does he keep a dog of any kind?" asked the medical man.

"Oh! no," replied Mrs. Brace. "On the contrary, he cannot bear them."

"Then, to speak more plainly still," said the doctor, "are you aware whether he has ever been bitten by a dog?"

"Good God!" exclaimed the milliner, a sensation of sudden horror seizing upon her as the damp of death strikes to the very marrow of one's bones when descending into the crypt or sepulchres of some ancient cathedral. "Yes—I recollect—on a certain occasion—a dog got into the house—and as the invalid was dragging it forth from under the bed, it lacerated his arm."

"Then, madam," returned the doctor, "there is no hope for this person. In a few hours he will be numbered with the dead," he added in a scarcely audible whisper, and with a grave seriousness of countenance. "You must make up your mind to behold a hideous and shocking death-bed—for there is naught more appalling than the agonies of hydrophobia!"

"Ah! then it is really this dreadful malady which has seized upon the wretched man?" said Mrs. Brace, shuddering all over with an irrepressible feeling of horror, which was as painful for the moment as the bitterest affliction could possibly have proved.

"Yes, madam—it is hydrophobia," returned the doctor; "and no earthly power can save that man. His doom is sealed—his fate is unalterable: 'tis the same as if his coffin were already made and his grave dug—for in a few hours he will be numbered with the dead!"

"But, doctor—doctor," said Mrs. Brace, with a feverish nervousness of manner and an agitated tone, as she laid her trembling hand upon the surgeon's arm,—"is it catching? do I incur any danger by watching at his side? If he were to bite me—if the foam of his lips were to touch me——"

"No harm can arise, madam," was the response:

"you have nothing to fear. But now the convulsions and spasms are seizing upon the invalid again—and I must administer some sedative. In a few minutes I will return."

The doctor accordingly hastened away to procure what he required from his own dwelling, which was in the immediate neighbourhood;—and during his absence Frederick Dray passed through another fit of furious delirium and excruciating pain. He raved in a manner that was shocking to hear: and he writhed and tossed upon the couch as if invisible serpents had coiled around him. At one moment he besought and implored Mrs. Brace in the most piteous terms not to murder him: then he invoked heaven's vengeance and hell's curses upon her head. Yet all this while he neither sought to harm her, nor even to move from the bed on which he was racked by such intense and poignant agonies.

The fit had somewhat subsided by the time the doctor re-appeared; and he now proceeded to force the invalid to swallow an opium dose. By assuming a commanding tone and authoritative aspect, he succeeded in coercing the miserable wretch; and the sedative soon produced its effect. Dray grew tranquil, and presently fell into a slumber that was apparently easy.

"The moment he wakes up again, madam," said the doctor, "administer another dose. If you have any difficulty in persuading him to swallow it, send immediately for me. But I pray you to understand that this treatment is merely adopted in order to smooth his passage into another world, and not with any hope of prolonging his life in this. His doom is sealed—and no earthly power can save him."

The doctor then took his departure, with an intimation that he would return again at midnight, if he were not fetched before.

"And he may rest assured that I shall not send for him!" muttered Mrs. Brace to herself, as she resumed her seat by the side of the couch. "Thank my stars that this man," she added in her musings, as she glanced towards the sleeper, "is about to die: it has perhaps saved me the crime of another murder!"

Then the milliner fell into a deep reverie, during which all the incidents of the last twenty years of her life rose up in her imagination, vivid and clear as if even those which were most remote had occurred but on the yesterday. She looked back to the time when she was in all the glory and splendour of her charms—she saw herself gradually becoming bolder and bolder in the course of vice and immorality—she marked her career deepening into profligacy, until she became as dissolute as a Messalina—and she could trace the process by which her heart grew callous and hardened, until it was completely ossified against all feelings and emotions of a better kind. Then, as she thus gradually followed her own career along the vista of memory, down to the very time when she was now seated by the bed-side of the doomed wretch who was shuddering and moaning in his sleep, she could not help thinking—indeed, the conviction was insensibly forced upon her mind—that had she in her earlier years chosen the paths of virtue and rectitude, she would have been happy, honoured, and respected now,—but that having deviated into the ways of vice and debauchery, she had been gradually yet irresistibly led on to crime—and this crime was already opening a yawning gulf at her feet!

While these appalling thoughts were uppermost in her mind, Frederick Dray suddenly awoke;—and a fit of delirious anguish and spasmodic poignancy, more terrible than the former ones, seized upon him all in a moment. With eyes that glared like those of a tiger—with the foam upon his mouth—and with his features all livid and swollen like those of the drowned, he writhed, tossed, and raved in a manner that was horrible to witness.

"Let me go—let me go!" he cried: "fiends are tearing me with their claws of red-hot iron—serpents are coiling round me and darting forth their fiery tongues in my face! Let me go, I say—let me go! Hell opens to receive me—the eternal gulf sends up its forked flames to enwrap my form. Some demon is thrusting a long sharp wire through my brain——O horror! horror! I cannot endure it! Hell——fiends——demons——spare me—spare me! Take away these monstrous serpents that encircle me—their touch is pollution—their breath is poisonous. O God! how their coils wind round me—now cold and clammy——Oh! so cold, so clammy! I can't endure it, I say—'tis hell—'tis the eternal torture itself! And now they are searing my brain with red-hot iron—they are tearing my eyes from their sockets—they are stabbing my heart in a thousand places. Just heaven! can this be my doom? Oh! take away those dead bodies from my sight—remove those cold, cold corpses! I did not do it—no, no—I did not murder that one—nor yet that one! Ah! who says I hanged him? No—no: you lie—you lie——'twas she who did the deed—'twas she—the milliner—Mrs. Brace—the woman whom I loved—whom I coveted—whom I enjoyed—and whom I now loathe! Take her away—take her away! 'Twas she who tempted me—she murdered the first man—and I buried him under the stone in the back kitchen——you will find him *there!* Aye—and the other, too—they are both there——both—both!"

The wretched man's voice died away in a sound resembling the bark of a dog;—and as Mrs. Brace raised her eyes from the convulsing countenance on which they had been fixed in dread and horror during those fearful ravings, she saw the doctor standing before her.

"Ah! madam, I warned you that it would be terrible," he said, shaking his head solemnly. "Alas! for poor human nature! Man—vain man—glorifies himself: and yet he may be reduced to such a wretched, hopeless state as this at last! But you must not suffer this scene to produce too great an effect upon your mind, madam," added the doctor, perceiving that the milliner was gazing at him in mute horror and consternation from the chair in which she was seated.

"Did you not hear what he said?" she at length demanded, in a voice of sepulchral hollowness: and her look grew more steadfastly fixed and more despairingly intent, as if she felt that the answer of the medical man would be the pronunciation of her doom.

"Yes, madam—I heard the terrible things he was uttering in his delirium," said the doctor: "but I am so accustomed to listen to the ravings of disordered imaginations, that they have almost ceased to produce any effect upon me. It is no uncommon

occurrence for the rabid and insane to accuse themselves or others of the most heinous crimes."

"Ah! is it indeed so?" cried Mrs. Brace, greedily catching at the explanation which the doctor gave naturally enough; for he little thought how much truth there was in the last words that he had overheard falling from the doomed man's lips.

"Take her away! take her away!" suddenly yelled forth the wretch, breaking out again. "It was she who incited me, I say——'twas she who made me do it! The first man was murdered by her hand alone——"

"For God's sake give him opium!" whispered Mrs. Brace, seizing the doctor's arm with nervous violence and upturning towards him a countenance the ghastliness of which terrified him for a moment.

"I will do so," he said: "give me the bottle."

But scarcely had he taken it in his hand, when Frederick Dray flung forth both his arms with a sudden paroxysm of lancinating agony; and the phial was dashed from the surgeon's grasp.

"They shall not hang me—they shall not force me up the steps of the scaffold!" he cried in an infuriate manner. "No—no—they must not pinion me—they must not fasten the noose round my neck and put the nightcap upon my head! I am not guilty——I did not murder *both*——only *one!* 'Twas she—'twas she," he yelled forth, fixing his savage glaring eyes upon Mrs. Brace, and extending one arm with pointed finger towards the wretched woman who shrank back shuddering all over in the easy-chair where she was seated. "She poisoned the first man, I tell you——and she helped me to hang the second. Then we raised a stone——it was in the back kitchen——down below——the back kitchen——of the other house, mind——and then we buried them at dead of night——not both at the same time, though both together——"

"Sir——doctor——my dear friend," murmured Mrs. Brace, now recovering the use of her speech and once more clutching the medical man violently by the arm;—"you must put an end to this——or it will drive *me* mad also!"

"Oh! now the serpents coil more and more around me!" yelled forth the rabid wretch; hell's flames have caught me—I am on fire——I am on fire——I am burning——'tis agony—anguish——horror, horror! Ah! now the fiends are bearing me to the scaffold——they have poisoned me—they have fastened the noose round my neck—they have drawn the white cap over my face——Oh! I cannot breathe—they are suffocating me——and now they have stood me upon the drop——horror! horror! I hear the bolt giving way——Stop! I will confess!—a moment—a single moment! Chaplain, a word in your ear——Hark! listen! This is what you must do: take a crow-bar—raise the central flag stone in the back kitchen——and there, buried deep, deep, beneath the mould, you will find the two murdered men! But, ah!" shrieked forth the dying maniac his whole form convulsing horribly, and his eyes ready to start out of his livid, hideous face,—— "this is treachery—infernal treachery! Have I not confessed?—have I not told you where the bodies lie? And yet you leave me here upon the drop——with the noose round my neck and the cap over my countenance——Hell! fiends! maledictions!—you are going to hang me after all——horror! horror! the bolt is drawing back—the drop is slipping beneath my feet——O God!"

And with a tremendous convulsion that made the bed creak and even the very room shake perceptibly, the wretched man gave up the ghost.

Half senseless with the awful consternation that was upon her, Mrs. Brace lay back in the arm-chair;—and she had only a dimly vacant idea that her accomplice in crime had breathed his last. Twice did the medical man whisper to her that he was dead, ere she seemed thoroughly to comprehend him: and then, all in a moment, a singular revulsion of feeling took place within her. A sensation of relief suddenly superseded that tremendous terror and blank despair which had almost crushed both her physical and moral energies; and as she said to herself, "My persecutor and tyrant is no more—I am now free!" it seemed as if a load were lifted from her mind and she had regained a lost independence.

This abruptly revived sense of security armed her with a proportionate courage and presence of mind;—and rising from the chair, she flung a rapid look upon the livid and distorted countenance of the corpse. Its appearance was horrible in the extreme. The eyes, stony and glaring in death's awful vacancy, seemed ready to start from the head—the tongue lolled out—and around the mouth were large flakes of foam speckled with blood.

"He raged dreadfully in his last moments," said Mrs. Brace, now turning her eyes quickly upon the surgeon, and with that piercing glance endeavouring to read the nature of the impression which Dray's delirious outpourings had made upon his mind.

"I have seldom heard or witnessed anything more dreadful," observed the medical man: but his tone and demeanour convinced Mrs. Brace that he attached no importance to the ravings of the deceased, and was consequently very far from suspecting how entirely they were based upon truth.

"What shocking things—Oh! what shocking things—appeared to have been uppermost in his mind!" exclaimed Mrs. Brace, now affecting a tone and air of commiseration for the dead.

"Maniacs, or people in a rabid condition such as that which we have just witnessed," returned the doctor, "frequently dwell upon some particular idea which they conjure up to haunt them. But as my services are no longer needful here, madam, I shall wish you good night."

Mrs. Brace shook hands with the medical man, who thereupon took his departure:—and the milliner hastened to her own parlour, where she immediately partook of a large dram of brandy. She then sate down, though at that late hour—for it was now past midnight—to meditate upon the occurrences of this memorable evening.

CHAPTER CCIX.

MR. BIGDEN'S OFFICE.

We must now return to Caroline Walters, who, it will be remembered, fled from Mrs. Brace's house with considerable precipitation after the sudden explosion of her deeply ramified scheme. She had resumed the page's livery, simply because she

would have found it inconvenient to be seen hastening through the streets of London in a bridal-dress at that time of night: but it was not her intention to adopt the same disguise which she had hitherto worn. For it must not be forgotten that the fearful accusation of murdering Mrs. Lindley, the midwife, was still hanging over her head; and that the fact of her having escaped from the custody of Grumley, by throwing herself from the window of the house in Fore Street into the Thames, as described in an earlier chapter, would only tend to confirm the general belief in her guilt. For the world did not know that Grumley had connived at that escape: and even if his disappearance had led to any suspicions on that head, they would not in any way alter the circumstantial evidence that pointed out Caroline as the murderess of the midwife.

While thus retrospectively glancing at these matters, we must also observe that though it was generally believed Miss Walters had perished in the Thames, yet this supposition on the part of the public by no means rendered it prudent for her to roam undisguised about the streets of London. Many persons had seen her at the police court when she was examined—the authorities of Horsemonger Lane Gaol were acquainted with her personal appearance—and all the various customers who had visited Mrs. Brace's establishment during the time she was in the milliner's service, would be capable of recognising her. Moreover, Lord Florimel, under the influence of rage and disappointment at the issue of the evening's adventures and the cheat she had endeavoured to practise upon him, might hasten and inform the officers of justice that Caroline Walters, accused as the murderess of Mrs. Lindley, was now actually in London: and therefore the young woman was environed by a thousand perils.

But she did not despair of surmounting them. She had plenty of money in her pocket—some of her own, being the accumulation of her wages while in Florimel's service; and some which he had given her to carry out all the arrangements of that evening. Thus provided, she was not at a loss how to act. Taking her way, accordingly, to a shop in Wardour Street where masquerade costumes and fancy-dresses were let out for hire, she knocked at the door, for the place was now closed and the shutters were up, it being past ten o'clock. The mistress of the shop answered the summons, and Caroline immediately said, "Do you remember the black page who hired the dress of a gipsy at your establishment?"

"Some months ago—for the great masquerade at Covent Garden?" observed the woman, inquiringly.

"The same," answered Caroline. "Well, you must remember me, then?"

"Oh! yes—to be sure?" said the woman. "The black page was only a pretty young girl after all—because I helped to dress her: and you are the same. I thought your face was not unfamiliar to me—and that livery too! Besides, you behaved very liberally to me—and that is another reason why I ought to remember you. Walk in, Miss—and tell me what I can do for you."

Caroline accordingly entered the house; and when she was alone with the woman in her parlour, she said, "You have seen me disguised as a black page—you have helped to disguise me as a gipsy—and now you behold me disguised as a white page. What garb and character can you possibly recommend that will disguise me more effectually still?"

"You are somewhat too short for a young officer in the army, with a nice pair of moustaches," said the woman, in a musing tone, as she contemplated the slender and symmetrical shape of Caroline. "But if I was to put a pair of whiskers on your cheeks, they would at all events give you a masculine look."

"No—I do not fancy the officer's garb," observed Miss Walters. "I should seem ridiculously short in that dress, and my appearance would only court disagreeable attention. Think again—and be speedy."

"A midshipman in the navy!" exclaimed the mistress of the fancy-dress warehouse. "You might have a delicate pair of whiskers—I mean a moderate-sized pair, glossy and curled—just to prevent your face from appearing too babyish or too feminine;—and the blue garb of a sailor, with the neat little dirk by your side, would not be too glaringly attractive."

"Be it as you say!" exclaimed Caroline. "But have you such a dress ready at hand and which is sure to fit me?" she demanded.

"I should not have proposed the middy's uniform if I had not been prepared to supply it, young lady," said the woman. "And as for the whiskers," she added, producing a paste-board box containing a large assortment of those artificial embellishments for cheeks that were virgin of the razor,—"here you may pick and choose according to your own good pleasure."

Caroline accordingly selected a charming pair of false whiskers; and, the uniform being likewise produced, she was shown up-stairs into a chamber, where the mistress of the warehouse aided her in the arrangements of her new toilette. The midshipman's apparel fitted to perfection; and she seemed a sweetly interesting boy, until the whiskers were fastened with a solution of gum-arabic to her cheeks. Then, the dirk being slung to her waist, she looked like a youth of about one-and-twenty, very short in stature, and of delicate features. To increase the manliness of her appearance—or rather, to diminish its feminine air as much as possible—she consented to allow the woman to cut off a considerable portion of her beautiful hair;—and, when this sacrifice was made, she felt as she looked in the glass that she could now defy detection even on the part of the most searching eyes.

Having paid the mistress of the shop a liberal price for the articles thus purchased and the attentions ministered, Caroline Walters sallied forth;—and, after some little hesitation as to the immediate proceedings which she should adopt, she repaired to a coffee-house, where she called for some refreshment, together with writing materials. Her orders being obeyed, she wrote two brief letters: one was addressed to the *Marchioness of Ballenden, Ballenden Priory, Edgeware Road*,—and the other to the *Chief Magistrate at Bow Street*. She then went out again—put her letters into the nearest post-office box—and returned to the coffee-house. Here she ordered a bed for the night; and on being shown to a chamber, she at once retired to rest.

At about ten o'clock on the following morning, Caroline Walters, disguised in her midshipman's apparel, called at Mr. Rigden's place of business in Featherstone Buildings. On entering the outer office, she inquired whether the attorney was within; and the head clerk, turning to a youth who was busily engaged in copying some deed, said, "Alfred, go and tell the governor that a young naval gentleman wants to see him if he's disengaged."

"You know, sir," replied the youth, who was a pale, sickly, but interesting and intelligent lad of about seventeen or eighteen, and who addressed his superior in a tone of the deepest respect,—"you know, sir, that Mr. Rigden is very busily engaged this morning, and has given orders that he will not be disturbed."

"Ah! I recollect," said the principal clerk, in a musing tone; "he's preparing instructions for counsel in that affair of *Woodfall versus Florimel*."

"Indeed, sir!" ejaculated Alfred, with a sudden start; and Caroline observed that the youth's countenance, which was naturally pale, flushed with a glow of animation.

"Yes," continued the head clerk, not noticing that change which had thus struck the attention of the disguised young woman: "Mr. Rigden is deep in that case—and a very important one it is too. I do not therefore believe he will see anybody, unless it is on very particular business."

"*My* business is very particular," said Caroline. "Please to obtain me an immediate interview with your master," she added, speaking to the youth.

Alfred looked at the head clerk, who nodded his assent: and the boy stepped into Mr. Rigden's private office. He re-appeared in a few moments, and desired Caroline Walters to enter the *sanctum*. This invitation she immediately obeyed, closing the door behind her;—and when the seeming midshipman stood in the presence of the lawyer, the latter gazed upon her with the air of a man to whom the countenance of a visitor is not altogether unfamiliar, although he cannot at the moment guess where or when he has seen it before.

"You do not recognise me?" said Caroline, with an arch smile: then, instantaneously resuming a serious expression of countenance, she observed, "But you remember the young woman who brought you certain important documents a few months ago?"

"Ah! now I know you, my mysterious acquaintance!" cried the lawyer, with a partial smile. "But wherefore this disguise?"

"That is my affair," said Caroline, laconically. "I have called to inform you that Florimel has returned to town—and, what is more, that he has guessed by whom the documents were stolen from him. But the individual who took them is beyond his reach—and there is no chance of exposure in that quarter."

"Then our position remains unaltered and safe?" observed Mr. Rigden, inquiringly.

"So far as Florimel is concerned," replied Miss Walters. "But there is a certain lady who exercises a great influence over George Woodfall, the claimant to the Florimel peerage and estates; and I have reason to believe that she would play him false in order to serve her own purposes."

"You doubtless allude to the Marchioness of Bellenden?" said the lawyer. "But depend upon it, your suspicions are wholly unfounded. The Marchioness is a model of virtue, excellence, and piety—and she would not do a wrong action for the world. Ah! you smile incredulously ——"

"Perhaps I am too suspicious," observed Caroline, the sardonic expression still wavering upon her lips. "But I presume that if George Woodfall were to suffer himself to be persuaded by the Marchioness or anybody else to quash the proceedings already instituted on his behalf, he has the power, and you could not go on without his assent?"

"Exactly so," exclaimed Rigden. "But you cannot fancy that Mr. Woodfall would be mad enough to abandon a process which he is sure to gain in the long run?"

"Does not a certain Miss Rose Foster reside at Bellenden Priory?" asked Caroline: "and is not Mr. George Woodfall deeply in love with this young lady?"

"Such, I believe, are the facts," said the attorney.

"But what then?"

"Simply that Miss Foster lies under the deepest obligations to the Marchioness of Bellenden, and that her ladyship consequently exercises a boundless influence over the girl," continued Caroline. "This influence can of course be brought to bear upon George Woodfall: and now I will ask you, Mr. Rigden, whether you have not found the young gentleman hanging back somewhat during the last few weeks?"

"Well," said the lawyer, in a deliberate tone as he took a pinch of snuff,—"since you mention the fact, I must confess—indeed, I cannot conceal from myself, that Mr. Woodfall has *not* appeared so particularly urgent of late as he was at first—and he has moreover hinted that he experienced some reluctance in disturbing Lord Florimel in the enjoyment of the peerage, although he would certainly like to adjust the matter of the fortune in an amicable manner."

"Now will you believe, Mr. Ridgen," demanded Caroline, "that some secret influence has been at work?"

"But wherefore should the Marchioness of Bellendon interfere?" cried the attorney. "Is it because I am Lord Montgomery's solicitor and engaged against her ladyship in the memorable case which has been so long pending between his lordship and her, and which now verges towards a close? I can scarcely think that a lady who is so celebrated for her many virtues, her amiability, and her generous feelings, can possibly stoop to such meanness as to exercise her influence over Woodfall, simply because chance has made *me* his professional adviser."

"We will not stop to inquire into motives, Mr. Rigden," said Caroline: "but we will fix our attention upon facts. It is clear, then, that the Marchioness *has* used her influence to some little degree to prevent Mr. Woodfall from being too precipitate in the business——"

"But she has been absent for some weeks," observed Rigden.

"True. Miss Rose Foster has however remained at the Priory, in the care of a trusty old housekeeper, during the visit of Lady Bellenden to the country," said Caroline; "and Mr. Woodfall has of course visited the girl frequently. The Marchioness has no doubt corresponded with

Rose—and the advice insidiously conveyed in her ladyship's letters has exercised, through the agency of Miss Foster, the desired influence upon the mind of Mr. Woodfall. It needs no ghost to afford us this explanation, or enable us to gain this insight into the matter."

"You appear to be admirably well acquainted with all that is passing in certain quarters," said Mr. Rigden, surveying the disguised young woman with mingled curiosity and wonder. "But who could have supposed that the Marchioness of Bellenden possessed such a really petty mind and mean disposition?"

"Perhaps you will know more of her character some day," observed Miss Walters, drily. "At all events I have now told you sufficient to make you aware of the influence which has been exercised over George Woodfall. On my side, I have already adopted a measure which will perhaps induce the Marchioness to change her policy in that respect: but I thought it better to give you this hint notwithstanding—because, should you observe a recurrence of vacillation or backwardness on the part of Woodfall, you may know to what cause to attribute the same. I suppose you are up to your neck in business?" remarked Caroline, as she flung a look over the piles of papers which covered the lawyer's desk.

"Yes. What with the case of *Montgomery versus Bellenden* and that of *Woodfall versus Florimel*, together with other important matters," said Mr. Rigden, "I have scarcely time to take either food or rest."

"And who will gain the former suit, think you?" asked Caroline.

"It is hard to say—hard to say," replied the cautious attorney, taking snuff. "I am sadly perplexed with it, I can assure you. The presence of young Lord Raymond Montgomery, the Earl's brother, is absolutely necessary to the favourable

progress of the cause—and I cannot get him up to London. He does not even reply to my letters. But he is a singular character—disappointed in love—and living, I believe, in a most secluded manner. However, I shall take a run down into the country in a few days and ferret him out."

"I see that you have got the Florimel documents all before you," observed Caroline, as she rose to take her departure.

"Hush!" said the attorney, tapping his snuff-box: for while the young woman was yet in the middle of her remark, Alfred appeared in the room from the outer office—and, as her eyes were fixed at the moment upon the papers to which she had alluded, she did not observe the entrance of the youth.

The lawyer's sudden warning caused her to start and turn her looks towards the door: and as her eyes fell upon Alfred's countenance, she was struck by the conviction that the same glow of ill-subdued joy which she had previously observed, again lighted up his features.

A singular feeling arose like a presentiment in Caroline's bosom: and she experienced an uneasiness which she could not explain to herself.

"Who is that boy?" she inquired abruptly, so soon as Alfred had delivered a message and withdrawn.

"He has been some few weeks in my service," answered Rigden. "But wherefore this question?"

"I scarcely know!" said Caroline: "And yet I do not altogether like his appearance. There is something sneaking in his manner and sinister in his look. Take care of him—that's all."

"You really alarm me, young woman," observed the attorney: "for, to tell you the truth, I took him without either reference or character——"

"So did Lord Florimel engage me at the beginning," thought Caroline within herself.

"Yes—contrary to my usual caution," added Mr. Rigden, taking a huge pinch of snuff, "I suffered myself to be over-persuaded by some history of woe and distress which Alfred told me: and being in want of just such a youth at the instant, I engaged him. He seems a steady, intelligent, well-meaning lad——"

"Take care of him, I repeat," interrupted Caroline, dogmatically "I don't like his physiognomy—though heaven knows I should be sorry to be the means of depriving him of his bread, if he is really honest. I may be deceived, therefore: but once again I say, be upon your guard."

And with these words Caroline Walters took leave of Mr. Rigden.

CHAPTER CCX.

THE CHAIN OF EVIDENCE.

In the meantime the chief magistrate at Bow Street had been much surprised by the perusal of a certain letter which was delivered to him by the usher of the court the moment his worship took his seat upon the bench. The letter, which was anonymous and written in a pretty female hand, contained a statement so remarkable, that the magistrate knew not precisely how to deal with the case. But after a little consideration, he retired into the private room, and summoned thither the head constable to deliberate over the matter.

"Crawley," said the magistrate to the individual who thus filled the post which Mr. Peter Grumley's mysterious disappearance had left vacant some months previously,—"what do you think of this?"

The head constable perused the letter which the magistrate placed in his hand; and, after nearly a minute's profound reflection, he said, "I am quite puzzled, your worship."

"What sort of a character is borne by the person referred to therein?" demanded the magistrate.

"Gay—and not over particular, your worship," was the reply: "used to be much patronised by the upper classes—'specially the lords and gentlemen. But I don't think—that is, I can scarcely fancy there's any truth in this piece of information."

"And yet it is singular—very singular," observed the magistrate. "If a responsible person had come forward to give private information of such a character, we should at once act upon it and issue a search-warrant. But this anonymous missive, perhaps intended after all as a piece of fun or wickedness——"

"And still, your worship," remarked Mr. Crawley, "some kind of notice must be taken of the matter. Suppose I just step down there and in a quiet way institute a little inquiry?"

"Yes — that will be best, Crawley," said the magistrate: "and in the meantime let the circumstance of the arrival of such a letter be maintained a profound secret. If nothing comes of it, then the fact of such a serious accusation having been made through sheer wickedness and with a view to injure an innocent person, need never become known."

"Just, so, your worship," replied Crawley: and putting the anonymous letter in his waistcoat-pocket, he proceeded to execute his commission.

A quarter of an hour afterwards Mr. Crawley was walking along Pall Mall, when he noticed that he was being followed by a thin, miserable, half-starved mongrel dog: and, finding that the poor animal persisted in remaining close at his heels, he was about to kick it away, when it suddenly struck him that he was not altogether unfamiliar with the appearance of the beast.

"Surely this must be the brute that Mobbs used to have prowling after him?" muttered Mr. Crawley to himself: then, recollecting the name of the dog of which he was thinking, he said, "Toby! Toby!"

The poor beast instantaneously began wagging its tail with delight; and rising on its hind legs, it began to lick the constable's hand.

Crawley now examined the dog with more attention: and he at length became convinced that it was the identical one which belonged to Mobbs. The discovery of the animal rendered him very thoughtful and serious: and as he walked along, he muttered between his teeth, "Well, there's something very strange in this. It's like another link in the chain ——and now I'm more inclined than I was at first to attach some importance to the contents of the anonymous letter."

Thus musing, Mr. Crawley proceeded on his way along Pall Mall—passed Mrs. Brace's establishment, into which he gave a good stare—and sped to a butcher's shop in Bury Street, where he ordered a copious repast of meat to be bestowed upon

the dog. Toby devoured the welcome provender with a ravenous appetite; and, having lapped up a suitable quantity of water, he frisked about the constable's legs and leapt up to lick his hand as if in gratitude for the kindness shown him.

"Now then," said Mr. Crawley to himself, as he sallied forth from the butcher's shop, with the dog at his heels, "we'll investigate this little business."

Retracing his way, the constable was just on the point of turning out of St. James's Square into Pall Mall, when he ran against a gentleman who was coming quickly round the corner.

"I beg your pardon, sir," exclaimed Mr. Crawley.

"No offence, my man," said the gentleman: then, as his eyes fell upon the dog, he observed, "You must get that beast muzzled as the warm weather comes on. I don't like the look of him."

"Lord bless ye, sir," cried the officer, patting the mongrel as it raised itself against his leg, "I'm not afraid of dogs. On the contrary, I love them dearly—and though I've been bit once or twice, you see I'm not dead of —— what d'ye call it?"

"Hydrophobia, you mean," said the gentleman: then, taking the constable by the button-hole, he observed in a serious tone, "My good fellow, do not treat the matter thus lightly. If you had witnessed the dreadful spectacle which I saw last night, you would never forget it."

"Was it a case of——what d'ye call it again?" asked Mr. Crawley.

"Hydrophobia," returned the gentleman. "My time is precious—and I dare say yours is too: but it is my duty, as a Christian and a medical practitioner, to detain you for a moment while I give you a warning that may be serviceable. Last night, then, I was summoned to see a person who was supposed to have gone mad. I went, and found him labouring under the influence of hydrophobia. 'Twas a truly shocking case: and in his delirious ravings he uttered language which haunts me still, accustomed though I am to scenes of horror."

"Was this case so very terrible then, sir?" inquired Crawley.

"The most terrible death-bed I have ever witnessed," returned the medical gentleman. "The unhappy wretch died under the belief that he was suffering the last penalty of the law upon the scaffold. He accused himself and a lady who was by at the time, of having committed two most horrid murders: and to show you what dreadful freaks the imagination will play its victim under such circumstances, he actually believed that he was making a confession to the Newgate Ordinary as he stood upon the drop. He fancied that the objects of his imaginary crimes had been interred beneath a stone—in a back kitchen——"

"Hey? what?" cried Mr. Crawley, now becoming much excited as well as deeply interested. "Where, in heaven's name, sir, did this affair take place?"

"At a house close by," answered the medical man. "Indeed, I have just been to visit the lady herself and ascertain whether she had recovered from the fright. But wherefore do you regard me in this singular manner?"

"Because, sir," replied Crawley, solemnly, "I have good reason to believe that the history you have just told me is another link in a chain of evidence——"

"Good heavens!" ejaculated the doctor, unfeignedly shocked and amazed: "you do not mean me to infer that there is any foundation for the dreadful tale of the double murder?"

"Read this, sir," returned Mr. Crawley: and he put the anonymous letter into the doctor's hand.

The contents were as follow:—

"*To the Chief Magistrate of Bow Street,*

"Under the great flag-stone in the back kitchen of Mrs. Brace's house in Pall Mall, lie buried the bodies of the two missing officers, Grumley and Mobbs. How they came by their death, is for your worship to discover."

The doctor staggered against the wall for support, as his eyes ran over these few lines. He was seized with consternation and horror at the thought that a woman whom he had professionally attended for years, could have been guilty of such hideous crimes, or even an accomplice in their perpetration. He knew that Mrs. Brace was not the most immaculate being in existence: but he was utterly unprepared for the discovery that her profligacy as a gallant lady was nothing in comparison with her black turpitude as a criminal.

"You are astonished, doctor—and well you may be," said Crawley, as he took back the letter and once more secured it in his waistcoat pocket. "I would not believe it at first, although I came to investigate the business as a matter of course. But link after link in the chain of evidence has been supplied—I don't know whether by accident or by Providence——"

"Yes—it is Providence that does all this!" exclaimed the doctor, in a solemn and impressive manner. "I suppose you are an officer of justice?" he observed, after a brief pause.

"Exactly so," returned Crawley. "Be pleased to give me your card, sir—as I may want your evidence presently."

"Unhappy woman!" said the medical practitioner, as he complied with the constable's demand: "to what a pass has she brought herself! Oh! now I remember her agitated looks—her singular expressions—her frightened manner, last night: but far—very far was I from attributing all that trouble and terror to the true cause. It is a painful duty which you have to perform, constable, in taking a woman into custody on such a charge."

"I'm accustomed to it, sir—and my feelings are rather tough," observed Mr. Crawley. "But I shall say good bye for the present: and when I want you to attend to give evidence, I'll let you know."

The doctor and the officer then separated: and while the former returned slowly and in deep thought to his own dwelling, the latter hastened back to Bow Street to report to the magistrate all that had occurred and procure the necessary assistance for pushing the investigation to the end.

About half-an-hour afterwards, Mr. Crawley, armed with a warrant, and attended by three subordinate constables,—followed also by the mongrel Toby,—suddenly made his appearance at the milliner's establishment in Pall Mall.

The three young females whom Mrs. Brace still kept in her employment, were in the shop at the moment when this alarming irruption took place: but the milliner herself was in her favourite parlour, pondering over the incidents of the last twelve hours, and congratulating herself on the death of Frederick Dray.

"Where's the lady of the house?" demanded Crawley of the foremost of the three young women, who were seized with alarm at the appearance of the constables. "Answer me in the King's name."

This summons made the affrighted girls aware of the official position of the intruders: and so great was their terror that they were unable to answer the question put to them. The constables accordingly pushed through the shop into the house: and Mrs. Brace, hearing the sound of footsteps, came forth from her parlour to ascertain what was the matter.

But the instant she beheld the visiters, her conscience told her who they were and why they came: and, with a moan of ineffable anguish, she fell senseless at their feet.

At the same moment the dog sprang towards her, and began barking as if at a known enemy; and Crawley had some difficulty in preventing the animal from snapping at the limbs of the motionless woman. Ordering one of his men to remain in charge of her, the officer descended the kitchen stairs, followed by the other two Bow Street runners whom he had brought with him, and likewise attended by the faithful dog. Entering the servants' room, he ordered those whom he found there, to hasten up to the parlour and administer the necessary restoratives to their mistress;—and the domestics, who saw full well that there was something wrong, lost no time in doing as they were commanded—but rather to obtain the speedy gratification of their curiosity than through any particular affection for Mrs. Brace.

We must leave the reader to imagine the mingled horror, surprise, and dismay which seized upon the domestics when they heard the tremendous truth from the lips of the constable left in charge of the murderess. In the meantime we shall follow Mr. Crawley and his party to the back kitchen, whither they soon penetrated.

The moment they set foot in that place, the dog Toby bounded forward and began sniffing and whining round the central flag-stone.

"You see the instinct of that poor beast," observed Crawley: "he knows his master is buried underneath—and he knew also just now that he owed some kind of a grudge to Mrs. Brace—for he would have certainly bit her if I had not drawn him off. Depend upon it, this here dog was a witness of the murder."

"No doubt," replied one of the subordinates: and producing a crow-bar, a pick-axe. and a spade from a sack which he carried, he said, "Shall we fall to work, sir?"

"By all means, my man," returned Crawley. "The last link in the chain of evidence lies below,—or I am terribly out in my reckoning."

To their task the two assistants went; and the fact that the stone had been recently disturbed was soon proven by the facility with which it was now raised from its setting. Then the circumstance of the earth yielding easily to the shovel, was a farther sign that the information contained in the anonymous letter and the testimony acquired from the doctor would turn out to be correct. In another half-hour, all uncertainty—if any had still existed upon the point—was at an end: for the livid corpse of Mobbs was first drawn forth from the grave—and then the putrifying body of Grumley was dragged up in its turn and stretched on the paved floor of the kitchen.

Thus did the unblest tomb give up its dead at last: thus did the deep pit surrender its murdered tenants to furnish the last damning link in the chain of evidence against the milliner!

Meantime the unhappy woman had been recalled to consciousness, in the parlour where she had been left to the care of the constable, and whither her servants had hastened at Crawley's bidding. And, oh! to what excruciating memories and poignant convictions was the wretched milliner thus aroused. For an instant, on opening her eyes and gazing wildly around, she had fancied and flattered herself that she was labouring under the influence of a horrible dream: but when she beheld the sinister countenance of the officer, and then read consternation mingled with a morbid curiosity upon the features of her servants, she knew that it was *not* a vision, but a hideous reality;—and as her mental looks were flung forward along the vista of the future, in order to estimate at a glance the consequences which she had to fear or the amount of hope which she might entertain, the prospective view that she thus took was suddenly bounded by the scaffold which rose up, black and ominous, before her!

Oh! we have said elsewhere, and we repeat it now—for the fact cannot be chronicled too often—that the folly of crime is, if possible, even greater than its guilt. There is no condition in the world, however deplorable or however perilous, that can be really and positively ameliorated by wrong-doing. The poor man may become rich by means of a crime: but will his riches, thus acquired, bring him happiness? No—ten thousand times no! There may or there may not be such a secret spiritual thing within us as conscience: but assuredly our own hearts reward or torture us according to our deserts. He who commits a crime, lives in constant danger and dread of detection: and such an existence as this hath no enjoyment. Better to eat a crust in the consciousness of personal security, than sit down to the most sumptuous banquetting-board in terror at every knock at the door! Better to walk through the streets without a penny in the pocket, yet fearing no molestation, than to roll in a carriage along the fashionable thoroughfares in the apprehension that every police-constable who looks at the equipage is about to stop it and drag f rth its owner!

The annals of crime all proclaim these facts. Fauntleroy, the forger, passed years in an unceasing state of mental excruciation: he plunged into dissipation to drown care—but even with the wine-cup at his lip or in the arms of beauty, was he haunted by a phantom that ever with extended hand pointed to the scaffold. What did Hocker obtain by the murder of Delarue? And would it not have been better for the Quaker Tawell to have thrown himself upon his knees before his wife and avowed his illicit connexion with another, rather than have put that other to death? The result was that his wife not only discovered the amour, but has now to mourn for the rest of her days that she is the widow of a murderer. Again, what did Rush acquire by his wholesale assassinations?—instead of the undisputed possession of his farm, he earned an ignominious death. And what gained the Mannings by their crime?—nothing to

compensate them for one single moment of the mortal suspense which they endured until they were captured, or of the hearts' goadings which they must have subsequently suffered till the drop fell beneath their feet on the roof of Horsemonger Lane Gaol.

Now, setting aside the black iniquity of the crimes just alluded to, let us contemplate their folly. Because if a man has not within himself a sufficiency of virtue to deter him from wrong-doing, let us appeal to his more selfish feelings—his egoism, in a word—and show him that he is a fool and an idiot to endanger his personal security. Doubtless the individual who makes up his mind to perform a deed of turpitude, hugs the belief that he will remain undiscovered. But experience is against this delusive—this fatal reasoning. Where one criminal escapes, ninety-nine are detected: the few exceptions, therefore, only prove the general rule. Out of a hundred persons who fling themselves off Waterloo bridge, in order to commit suicide, one may be saved by the boatmen from the shore: the remainder succeed in accomplishing their dreadful purpose. But what man in his sound senses would calculate upon those chances, and arrive at the conclusion that if he leaps from the bridge in a frolic he is sure to be the *one* who will be rescued? Such a proceeding would be utter madness—bedlamite folly: and so it is with *crime!*

To return, however, to our tale. In an almost senseless condition was Mrs. Brace borne to a hackney-coach which was procured to convey her to Bow Street: and within an hour or two the whole of the West End was thrown into a perfect consternation and dismay by the intelligence that the fashionable milliner of Pall Mall had been arrested for the murder of the two missing constables.

When placed in the dock at Bow Street, the wretched woman recovered a sufficiency of her presence of mind to make her fully conscious of the awful position in which she stood: and, clinging tenaciously to hope even unto the very last, she proclaimed her innocence with the most passionate vehemence and an abundance of tears.

The testimony of the medical man was given—Crawley deposed to the details relative to the exhumation of the bodies—and the magistrate was about to remand the prisoner until the result of the Coroner's inquest should be made known, when the usher of the court informed his worship that there was a female in the waiting-room who had some important evidence to give. The magistrate ordered her to be introduced;—and in a few moments a young woman, overwhelmed with grief—pale—care-worn—and having the appearance of one who had only just risen from a sick bed, entered the court, leaning upon the arm of the usher. In this manner was she supported into the witness-box, where she was accommodated with a seat: and Mrs. Brace at once recognized the wan and altered features of Harriet, her discarded lady's-maid.

For some time the unhappy young woman was so convulsed with painful feelings, that she could not give utterance to a word. But at length she grew comparatively tranquil: and then, amidst many heart-wrung sobs and bitter lamentations, she proceeded to state all she knew concerning the murder of Grumley. She detailed how on entering the chamber of her mistress one night, she was informed that a dead body lay in the adjoining bath-room—how she had consented to break the matter to Frederick Dray and obtain his assistance in the disposal of the corpse—and how the murdered man was buried beneath the stone in the back kitchen. But she averred—and truthfully averred—her entire ignorance of the fact that Mobbs had subsequently shared the same fate, until she had heard of the discovery of the *two* dead bodies when calling an hour back at the milliner's establishment in Pall Mall. She also gave an account of the incident which had occurred one morning in the milliner's bed-room, when she had found Frederick Dray with his mistress, and when the former was so severely bitten by the dog which had secreted itself in the chamber. In conclusion, she stated that she had not now come forward to give her evidence through any jealous or vindictive feeling towards Mrs. Brace—but because the part which she had taken in the concealment of Grumley's body weighed heavily upon her mind, and she felt that her conscience would be eased by a full confession of all she knew and all she had done relative to that matter.

Having listened to everything that the unhappy young woman had to say, the magistrate inquired whether she had written an anonymous letter containing intelligence of such a nature as had led to the measures adopted by the constables to test the accuracy of that information. But Harriet positively declared that she had not written any letter of the kind. The anonymous billet was then read by the clerk: and the writer of it was duly called upon to come forward. No one responded to the summons: and the magistrate thereupon instructed Crawley to take such steps as he might consider expedient with a view to ascertain whence the mysterious missive had emanated.

His worship, with much gentleness of tone and commiseration of manner, proceeded to inform the unhappy Harriet that he should be forced to regard her, on her own confession, as an accessary after the fact in respect to the murder of Grumley: but he took it upon himself to assure her that the contrition which she now manifested and her desire to aid the purposes of justice, would not be lost sight of on the day of trial. To these observations Harriet replied that she was not ignorant of the peril to which she exposed herself when resolving to come forward and confess everything she knew: and her mind was evidently much relieved by the course which she had thus adopted.

But the murderess—Mrs. Brace, the once fashionable milliner,—she who had been the paramour of the Prince of Wales and of the handsomest and gayest nobles of the West End,—this wretched woman was completely overwhelmed by the presence of Harriet and the testimony she had given. Every ray of hope—even the last and faintest—had now disappeared: the crime was brought fully home to her—and with an awful shuddering that shook her frame to the innermost confines of her whole being, did she perceive that her fate was sealed!

The magistrate ordered the milliner and the lady's-maid to be both committed for trial,—the former on the charge of a double murder, and the latter as an accessary after the fact in respect to one of those crimes.

The prisoners were now removed to separate cells preparatory to the arrival of vehicles to convey them to Newgate. But ere the bolt of the massive door was drawn upon Mrs. Brace, she requested to speak to Mr. Crawley. This functionary was accordingly fetched from the court, and the milliner said to him, "Have you any objection to allow me to see the anonymous letter which was spoken of just now?"

"None at all," answered Crawley. "You would be entitled to a copy of it in the depositions." Here it is."

"That is the handwriting of Caroline Walters!" exclaimed the milliner, the moment she glanced over the billet: and a fiendish expression of vindictive malignity settled for a few moments upon her countenance, already so ghastly and changed!

"Caroline Walters?" echoed the constable. "I should know that name."

"The young woman who murdered Mrs. Lindley, the widwife of Fore Street," said Mrs. Brace.

"Ah! and who escaped from the custody of Peter Grumley!" ejaculated the officer. "Then she is lurking somewhere about in London."

"She was at my house last night—first disguised as a black page," continued the milliner—"and then apparelled as a bride. But doubtless she has adopted some other garb of concealment by this time."

"Very good. If she's in London, I will have her in custody before twelve hours elapse," exclaimed Crawley. "I suppose she was an accomplice in the affairs which have got you into trouble, ma'am?"

"Nothing of the kind," responded Mrs. Brace: "and I am utterly at a loss to imagine how she became aware——But of that no matter," cried the milliner, suddenly interrupting herself with feverish impatience. "Lose no time in searching for her—trace her out—arrest her—hang her—for it is she who will have sent me to the scaffold!"

And falling back upon her seat in the cell, the miserable woman, whose courage and presence of mind appeared to have returned during the former portion of her colloquy with the officer, gave free vent to all the mental agony that was now breaking up as it were the foundations of her soul.

An hour afterwards, the milliner and the lady's-maid were the occupants of separate cells in the prison of Newgate.

CHAPTER CCXI.

THE PATRICIAN LADY AND THE PLEBEIAN GIRL.

We must now return to Caroline Walters, whom we left at the conclusion of her interview with Mr. Rigden.

On issuing forth from that gent'eman's office, she retraced her way to the coffee-house where she had passed the night: and seating herself in a corner of one of the boxes, she opened a book in the contents of which she soon affected to be deeply absorbed. But her thoughts were elsewhere—and her ears were open to catch every piece of intelligence which any new comer might happen to impart to the other persons frequenting the place. Nor was Caroline compelled to remain very long in suspense, ere she acquired the certainty that her letter to the Bow Street magistrate had produced the wished-for result.

"I say," exclaimed an individual who bounced into the coffee-room at about half-past one o'clock in the afternoon, and who thus familiarly addressed himself to three or four of his acquaintances who were seated there,—"I say, my fine fellows, have you heard what an awful discovery and precious smash there's been up at the West End just now?"

"No. What is it?" was the query put with all the impatience of suddenly awakened curiosity.

"You remember that two Bow Street Officers, one Grumley and one Mobbs, disappeared very suddenly some little time ago—don't you? Well," continued the informant, "their fate has come to light this morning—and it seems they were murdered——"

"Murdered!" cried the listeners, with shuddering voices.

"Yes—murdered—and in a most mysterious manner too," continued the informant. "At all events their bodies have been dug up from under a stone in the kitchen or back-yard—I don't exactly know which——"

"But where? where? Who murdered them?" demanded the listeners, their curiosity now rising to a degree of fever-heat.

"You'll be astounded when I tell you. In fact, every body is astonished—no one can scarcely believe it——"

"But who is the murderer?" was the anxiously repeated query.

"Mrs. Brace, the fashionable milliner of Pall Mall: and she is at this moment in the dock at Bow Street!"

"Mrs. Brace!—good heavens!—who would have thought it?" were the ejaculations which now burst forth from the lips of the listeners. "But is it certain that she did it?—and under what circumstances?"

"Ah! that is not known at present. I was passing by the Police Office just now, and seeing a tremendous crowd round the door, I naturally inquired what was the matter. Then I heard all that I've just told you. I tried to get into the court—but it was thronged to suffocation, and the usher wouldn't allow me even to make the attempt. There's no doubt of Mrs. Brace's guilt, from all I could learn."

"And how was the thing discovered?" demanded a listener.

"I didn't learn," responded the informant. "We shall know all about it in the course of the afternoon—and to-morrow morning's papers will be full of the proceedings."

Caroline Walters lost not a syllable of this conversation. A hyena-like joy—the blending of ferocity and triumph—sprang up in her bosom as she thus learnt the success of her scheme; and the blood coursed hot and fevered through her tingling veins as she gloated over the immeasurable vengeance which she had wreaked upon the milliner.

"Ah! it was an evil day for thee, vile woman," thought Caroline within herself, "when thou didst sell me—*me*, the orphan confided to thy charge—to the treacherous, graceless, unprincipled Florimel! Mine is a nature to love fervidly—devotedly: but it is also a nature to avenge terribly. Ah! well do I remember, when first consigned to the dread solitude of my chamber at the infamous abode of

Mrs. Lindley,—well do I remember saying to myself that if I could not live on for love, I might for vengeance! And so soon as this vengeance of mine shall have been gratified,—when the milliner has swung upon the scaffold, and my seducer has been despoiled alike of rank and fortune,—then shall I care not how soon I quit this world of woe. Yes—vengeance first—and then suicide!"

And as she thus gave way to her reflections, the young woman leant with her elbow upon the table—her hands supporting her head—and her eyes fixed upon the book. She saw nothing *outwardly*: all her senses—all her faculties—all her thoughts were absorbed in that reverie the mental vision of which looked only *inward*.

At length, slowly awakening as it were from this morbid dream, she collected her ideas: and remembering that she had a particular character to enact and a special part to play—or in other words, that she must not yield to abstractions in which the most trivial incident might betray her sex—she cast a rapid look around the room to ascertain whether she had become the object of any marked attention. But the other persons present were too busily engaged in discussing the arrest of Mrs. Brace to notice anything peculiar that there might have been in the attitude or appearance of the disguised midshipman;—and she was therefore reassured on this head.

It was now nearly three o'clock: she accordingly desired some refreshment to be served up to her;—and having partaken thereof, she sallied forth from the coffee-house. Her present object was to engage a suitable lodging, where she might dwell in privacy and security while watching the progress of her schemes and the gradual operation of her vengeance. Without being particular as to what direction she took or in which neighbourhood she should choose an apartment, Caroline sped towards Oxford Street; and her steps chanced to lead her into Cavendish Square.

She was traversing this fashionable district in order to reach some of the streets which lay beyond, when her attention was all of a sudden caught by the features of a young lady elegantly dressed and leaning on the arm of an elderly gentleman of aristocratic appearance. This couple were about to enter a house in the Square at the moment that Caroline Walters was struck by the countenance of the lady: and hastening forward, she said, "Pardon me, madam—but I am delighted to meet you once more!"

"I do not recollect you, sir," was the haughty reply: then, as some sudden reminiscence flashed vaguely and dimly to the lady's mind, she fixed her eyes more intently upon the countenance of the disguised midshipman, observing, "And yet your features are not altogether unfamiliar to me."

"We once vowed friendship to each other," responded Caroline; "and beneath the roof of Mrs. Lindley."

"Ah! I recollect—you are Miss Walters!" exclaimed Fernanda—for Lady Holderness it was, in company with her husband: and she did not appear to be over well pleased at this encounter.

"What—Caroline Walters!" ejaculated Lord Holderness, starting nervously, and surveying the disguised female in a peculiar manner. "The young woman who was arrested——"

"And falsely accused of the murder of that same Mrs. Lindley whose name I mentioned ere now," added Caroline, in a firm tone and with a dauntless demeanour. "Madam," she continued, once more turning towards Fernanda, "I know not who you are—your name and rank you scrupulously kept concealed from me when we were dwelling beneath the same roof——"

"For God's sake detain us not, young woman," interrupted Lord Holderness, in a hasty and imperious whisper, as the liveried footman opened the front-door: and pushing Fernanda gently forward, the nobleman followed her into the hall.

Another moment—and the door was banged in Caroline's face.

But the instant that Lord and Lady Holderness were alone together in the parlour, they exchanged uneasy and troubled looks: then, as Fernanda tossed off her bonnet and threw aside her shawl, she said, "I do not like this meeting with that girl!"

"Nor I," returned the nobleman, in a voice of nervous excitement. "Something akin to prescience of evil has struck me——"

"And yet I do not see of what we have to be afraid," interrupted Fernanda, whose natural courage speedily came back to her aid. "It is impossible that this girl can have obtained any clue——"

"Who knows? who knows?" cried Lord Holderness, with increased trepidation alike of voice and manner. "Ah! Fernanda, conscience renders us the most despicable of cowards——"

"Say rather that conscience renders *you* a coward," exclaimed Fernanda, her scarlet lips wreathing with a contemptuous expression, and her violet eyes flashing a look of ineffable scorn upon her husband. "For my part," she continued, in that haughty tone of proud defiance which she was so frequently wont to adopt, "I acknowledge not the power of conscience."

"How often, Fernanda—oh! how often," cried Lord Holderness, trembling visibly, "must I implore you not to add blasphemy and impiety to the other crimes——"

"Which we have *both* committed—eh?" observed that young patrician female who was strong-minded in her wickedness. "But do not give way to idle terrors, Walter," she added in a milder tone. "At first I must confess that I was not particularly well pleased with an encounter that might lead to mischief and could not possibly do any good: but I have no doubt that Caroline Walters has gone her ways and will not let us hear of her any more. Besides, what after all could she say against me? That I was an inmate of Mrs. Lindley's establishment under particular circumstances. But to scandalize me behind my back, would be to draw down suspicious looks upon herself: and those suspicious looks would speedily penetrate the disguise in which she has clothed herself. No—no: trust me, Walter, that we have nothing to fear from that young woman."

Scarcely were these words uttered, when a loud double knock at the front door resounded through the house; and in a few moments the footman appeared, ushering Caroline Walters (whom the domestic of course took for a young naval officer) into the presence of Lord and Lady Holderness.

"What means this intrusion?" demanded Fer-

nanda, haughtily and fiercely, the moment the footman had withdrawn: and her eyes shot forth lightnings at Caroline.

"Did we not pledge an eternal friendship at Mrs. Lindley's?" was the exclamation of her to whom the peremptory query was addressed.

"But do you imagine me to be ignorant of the fact that you are charged with the murder of that woman?" cried Lady Holderness, now endeavouring to frighten and subdue Miss Walters by the assumption of a look of stern menace.

"It may be so," said Caroline, with a calmness that almost staggered Fernanda: "but I am innocent, nevertheless! Lady Holderness, I now know who you are— I know also that this is your husband: and if I have made any unpleasant allusion before him, it is your ladyship who has provoked it. Had you treated me with only ordinary kindness when I met your ladyship ere now at the door of your mansion, I should have been gratified—and not for a single instant should I have thought of obtruding myself farther upon your notice. A kind word, in recognition of former friendship, would have warmed my heart towards you: but your ladyship treated me with contumely—with insult;—and my wounded pride prompted me to resent this ungracious demeanour on your part."

"And would you have me apologise for what I have done?" demanded the patrician lady, in a tone of haughty defiance—though in her breast a certain misgiving, almost amounting to a positive uneasiness, had risen up while Caroline was speaking.

"Apology!" ejaculated Miss Walters, with a contempt as bitter as any irony that Fernanda was capable of using. "No apology from your aristocratic lips to my plebeian self would be sincere—and therefore I should reject it with scorn. But listen to me for a few moments. Not a quarter of an hour has elapsed since the door of your mansion was closed in my face. All the blood boiled in my veins: my soul was fired with resentment. Away I sped to the nearest shop: and there, while purchasing some trifle, I asked who lived at such-and-such a number in Cavendish Square. The shopkeeper was garrulous—and I learnt in a few minutes twenty times more than I could have possibly expected to glean in so short a space concerning you."

"And what have you thus learnt!" demanded Lady Holderness, still maintaining a tone and manner of cool defiance—while her husband walked towards the window and back again to the farther extremity of the room, with an agitation and a nervousness that he could not conceal. "What have you learnt, I ask?" repeated Fernanda, with the affected indifference of a conscious security, but really for the purpose of ascertaining how much Caroline knew, and whether she suspected anything more than what she had gleaned in the neighbourhood.

"I will answer your ladyship's question," returned Miss Walters. "From the communicative shopkeeper I learnt that Lord and Lady Holderness dwelt in this house—that Lord Holderness has two daughters, the Honourable Misses Clarendon, who do not live with him—and that Lady Holderness was the Honourable Miss Fernanda Aylmer, niece of the Earl and Countess of Desborough."

"Is that all?" inquired the patrician lady, fixing her eyes intently upon the countenance of the disguised female.

"Not quite," responded the latter. "Some time ago it was whispered that the Honourable Arthur Eaton, Lord Marchmont's son, and Miss Fernanda Aylmer were engaged to be married—but the match was broken off—Mr. Eaton became a prey to what was deemed an incurable malady—and Miss Aylmer was reported to have gone upon the continent. But Miss Aylmer did *not* visit a foreign clime," proceeded Caroline, with emphasis: "on the contrary, she retired to an establishment of mingled mystery and horror in Fore Street, Lambeth, where I formed her acquaintance. Ah! and she told me many, many things which were incomprehensible *then*,—many, many things relative to her vengeance, which was progressing with a certainty as terrible as its nature and its origin were alike unsuspected by its victim! But *now*, lady—*now*," exclaimed Caroline Walters, "I am enabled to understand all that was incomprehensible *then*! Having learnt who you are, and recalling to memory everything you told me at the midwife's house, I cannot possibly experience any difficulty in reading your history. It is clear to my mind as the noon-day sun is bright to the eye. Arthur Eaton seduced you—and *he* therefore was the victim of your vengeance. He was perishing by a slow and mysterious malady that defied all the wisdom of the physician—all the skill of the surgeon. *That* was the dark and deadly nature of your revenge! But he suddenly gets better—the spell is lifted from his existence—and in a short time he recovers altogether. Ah! lady, that was because you failed, for some reason or another, to carry out your vengeance to a full consummation! But, behold! the invisible hand of an unrelenting and remorseless persecution still follows him: he recovers from that malady which appeared to be hurrying him to the grave—and he is plunged into Newgate for a crime which he was incapable of committing."

"Who says that?—who dares to prejudge——"

And Fernanda stopped short in the exclamation which mingled anger and excitement was wringing from her lips.

"Who says so?" cried Miss Walters, with a stern and implacable expression of countenance. "I say it! Oh! I am quick—marvellously quick in penetrating into the deepest mysteries, the moment that I obtain a key to the decyphering of them! And what is more, proud lady," added Caroline, with a withering bitterness of accent, "I know that you are capable of anything and everything!"

"What mean you?" asked Fernanda, her presence of mind rapidly failing her, and yielding to agitation of emotions and confusion of manner.

"I mean, lady," continued Caroline Walters, in a tone that was solemn and sombre to a degree, so that Fernanda remained with the upheaved bosom of breathless suspense, and Lord Holderness stood still, motionless as a statue, and with every lineament of his pale countenance indicating a profound terror mingled with a poignant curiosity,—"I mean,' repeated the young woman whose ominous looks and voice had thus powerfully enthralled the attention of her patrician listeners,—"I mean that some months ago—on a night of storm and of

tempest—aye, a fearful night, and just fitted for the foul deed which rendered it more truly horrible than the profound darkness and the warring elements themselves could make it,—on that night, I say, a window was opened at the back of a house overlooking the Thames—and a new-born child was flung forth from the chamber where its mother lay,—yes, flung forth by the murderous hand of the midwife—to be engulfed in the rapid, dark, and turbid waters that rolled below!"

"Hush—speak not so loud!" murmured Lord Holderness, horrified at this tale which he now heard for the first time, but which he had no difficulty in associating with his wife.

"Caroline, wherefore all these particulars?" demanded Fernanda, repressing, as well as she was able, the cold shudder that she felt creeping over her form at this re-awakening of all the terrible memories connected with that night of horror.

"Besides, it is all mere assertion on your part!" she exclaimed, in a bolder and haughtier tone.

"Assertion!" echoed Miss Walters, bitterly: "what! when the plaintive shriek of that murdered babe—*your* babe, lady—still rings in my ears—aye, and vibrates unceasingly in my brain! Oh, my God, it appeared to me *then*—it appears to me *now*—as if I were an accomplice in the tremendous tragedy of that foul night! Because I heard the faint scream of the innocent as it fell from the casement into the swollen river; because I knew that it was the child of the patrician young lady who tenanted the next room to mine,—because I had no doubt that Mrs. Lindley herself was the murderess,—and because I subsequently gleaned from your lips enough to convince me that you were in the full possession of consciousness when you gave birth to that child, and therefore that you were cognizant of the doom to which the accursed

old harridan devoted it,—it was on account of all these circumstances, I say, that I felt as if I myself became an accessory and a co-partner in the appalling crime, inasmuch as I held my peace and gave no warning to justice of its perpetration!"

"Fernanda, Fernanda," whispered Lord Holderness in a hollow voice, as he drew his wife forcibly aside for a moment: "what are we to do with this young woman?—what does she require? Let us get rid of her, for heaven's sake!"

"Yes, yes," responded Lady Holderness, speaking hurriedly and apart to her husband: "but we must not appear to be afraid of her:"—then, turning towards the disguised female, she said in a more conciliatory tone than any she had yet adopted, "Caroline, you are heaping together a number of accusations, inferences, and suppositions, in order to vent your spite upon me—simply because I did not receive you with open arms the instant that you accosted me are now. But let us abandon that style of discourse. Accusation can be met by recrimination;—and, even if all we may bring forward on either side be strictly true, no beneficial result will arise to either of us. For you dare not proclaim to the world anything you know or fancy you know concerning me: and for my part, I have not the least inclination to call in a constable, and tell him that Caroline Walters is in my house, disguised in a naval uniform and an exquisite pair of whiskers."

"Ah! you adopt a bantering tone with me!" exclaimed Caroline, her wrath being piqued anew by the slight yet perceptible accent of irony which marked the concluding words of Fernanda's speech, and also curled her lip gently as she uttered them.

"You are determined to quarrel with me, Caroline," said Lady Holderness, now condescending to smile with a partial degree of affability. "But this is too absurd! What possible benefit will accrue to either of us by charges and counter-charges of a disagreeable nature. Tell me how I can serve you. Do you require money—advice——"

"Neither," interrupted Caroline in a peremptory manner. "But I am glad that we have met—because my ideas have all on a sudden been turned into a thoroughly new channel, respecting certain events that until within this hour have seemed buried in the most profound and impenetrable mystery."

"And those events?" said Fernanda inquiringly: but despite of all her efforts to maintain a dignified composure, the strong woman was shaken from head to foot by cruel alarm and apprehension,—aye, and not only from head to foot—but to the innermost recesses of her haughty and impious soul.

"Those events!" echoed Caroline, in a voice of cruel triumph. "Oh! it is not necessary to particularise them, lady—unless it be to observe that as surely and certainly as I am innocent of the death of Mrs. Lindley the midwife, so is Arthur Eaton guiltless of the murder of William Dudley!"

And having thus spoken, Caroline Walters was hastening from the room, when Fernanda sprang forward and caught her violently by the arm, saying in a deep and strangely altered voice, "We must not part yet, young woman—nor in this manner."

But Caroline would have broken forcibly away from the patrician lady, had not a sudden moaning and sobbing met her ears and caused her to turn her head. Then she beheld Lord Holderness convulsed with overpowering emotions—rocking to and fro on the sofa where he had flung himself—and covering his face with his hands.

"What does your ladyship require of me? and why do you detain me?" demanded Caroline.

"Let us be friends—dear friends once again—as we were at the midwife's," said Fernanda, still in that altered and agitated voice, and with a manner so troubled that she no longer attempted the vain task of concealing it.

"Lady, your proposal has come too late," responded Caroline, with a sinister and gloomy solemnity. "Your patrician arrogance sought to trample me under foot—your aristocratic presumption endeavoured to crush me beneath its heel. But the worm—aye, the humble worm—has turned, and has already frightened you! Beware lest it change into a serpent and sting you to the quick!"

Fernanda fell back in dismay at the terrible threat which was thus proclaimed, and at the flashing looks of scorn and ferocious triumph which accompanied the menace;—and Caroline Walters, availing herself of that opportunity, rushed from the room and quitted the house.

Well and truly indeed had she declared that the occurrences of the last hour had turned her thoughts into an entirely new channel—or rather, had opened to them an avenue along which they might travel with some degree of certainty and clearness relative to the course which they were thus taking. She had suddenly been led to contemplate many things in a new light: it appeared to her as if she had all in an instant and most unexpectedly emerged from a dense fog in which she had hitherto been walking;—and the result was that she had become inspired with a hope that changed the entire aspect of her destiny.

She longed to be alone in some room where she could sit down and ponder upon all these matters;—and so impatient was she to carry her new thoughts into some solitude where she might open this suddenly-found budget of ideas and weigh them one by one without hindrance and free from observation, that she could not wait to search for a lodging. She accordingly retraced her steps to the coffee-house already mentioned; and on entering the public room, she found it well nigh filled with customers who were engaged in discussing the particulars of Mrs. Brace's examination at Bow Street.

Caroline paused for a few minutes to listen to the details which the topic thus evolved; and she thence learnt that Harriet the lady's-maid had appeared as a witness and was included in the committal to Newgate. Something was also said about the anonymous letter: but the information which those present in the coffee room had obtained on this head, was too vague and slight to furnish any accurate notion of what had really taken place at Bow Street in connexion therewith.

Ignorant, therefore, that her missive to the magistrate had given rise to any proceedings calculated to menace her own personal safety,—but, on the contrary, gloating over the evident success of the means which she had adopted to ruin Mrs. Brace and send her to the scaffold,—Caroline Walters quitted the coffee-room and repaired to

the chamber which she had occupied on the previous night.

"That's a smart young fellow," observed one of the customers of the house, addressing the remark to the knot of persons with whom he was discoursing.

"Who do you mean—the boy in the middy's uniform?" exclaimed another of the group. "Well—for my part, I'll be hanged if I don't think it's a girl in disguise. There's something peculiar in the gait and walk——"

"Girl in disguise!" ejaculated Crawley, the Bow Street Officer, who happened to enter the coffee-house at this moment. "Who was speaking of a girl in disguise?"

"Do you want such a person, old fellow?" asked the previous speaker, to whom the constable was well known.

"I want a certain young woman—and she's very likely to be in disguise," was the response. "The fact is, I've just got Mrs. Brace's affair over—she's off to Newgate—and now I'm on the look out for another female——"

"Ah! this is quite a girl, I should say—unless it's really a boy after all," said the previous speaker; and every one present laughed at the coarse jest.

"Come, describe your hero, or heroine, as the case may be," observed Mr. Crawley, as he drew forth a paper from his pocket. "Here's the description of the girl that I want."

"Well," continued the previous speaker, "I should say that the young person of whom I'm talking, must be about one or two and twenty, if of the male sex and having real whiskers: but not more than seventeen or so, if of the female sex and having false whiskers."

"Age sixteen and a half," observed Mr. Crawley, referring to the paper which he held in his hand. "Short in stature—well made—rather slight—brunette complexion—very fine dark eyes—splendid teeth—rich red lips——"

"By jingo! it is the very same!" cried several voices. "But who is she? What has she done? Poor thing!—who'd have thought it?"

The constable waited not, however, to respond to these questions or pay any regard to the ejaculations of wonder and curiosity that arose from the assembled frequenters of the coffee-house: but proceeding straight up to the bar, he inquired which was the chamber of the young person alluded to in the preceding conversation. The bar-maid had overheard everything that had been said, and therefore had no difficulty in answering the query thus put;—and in less than a minute the constable entered the room to which Caroline Walters had so recently repaired.

She instantaneously saw that she was discovered. The appearance of the man denoted his calling—and the unfortune girl could not do otherwise than divine the object of this visit. For a few moments she trembled—turned very pale—and looked confused: but recovering her presence of mind, she boldly demanded his business. This was at once explained, precisely as she had foreseen: and Caroline affected to laugh at the idea that she was other than what she seemed—namely, a veritable midshipman. But Mr. Crawley was confident that he had made no mistake in the matter: and he insisted that she should proceed with him to Bow Street. Caroline was forced to comply; and as she passed through the coffee-room in the custody of the officer, the ardent curiosity of which she found herself the object, brought a burning blush to her cheeks. That crimson glow and the downcast look which accompanied it, confirmed the suspicion already entertained with regard to her real sex;—and on arriving at the police-office, she was fain to confess the truth in order to avoid the ignominy of being stripped by the searchers.

She was then placed at the bar—identified as Caroline Walters—and, after a brief examination, committed to Newgate to take her trial for the murder of Mrs. Lindley, the mid-wife.

CHAPTER CCXII.

ALFRED.

We must now return to Mr. Rigden's offices in Featherstone Buildings.

After Caroline Walters had taken her departure, the youth Alfred seized an opportunity to write the following words upon a slip of paper:—"*At last I have succeeded! You may expect me to-night.*" Then, still unobserved by the head clerk who sate facing him at the huge double desk in the front office, the boy folded up the paper in the form of a note—wafered and addressed it. A few minutes afterwards he found a pretext for slipping out; and hastening to the nearest two-penny post, he dropped his letter into the box. He then returned to the office—resumed his place at the desk—and continued the work upon which he was engaged.

Meantime Mr. Rigden, ensconced in the arm-chair at his own desk in the inner office, was once more deeply engrossed in the study of the various deeds which lay spread out before him: until he was presently aroused by the entrance of his noble client, the Earl of Montgomery.

"Ah! I am glad your lordship has come," exclaimed the solicitor, taking a pinch of snuff with his usual precaution, so as not to permit the slightest grain to fall upon his shirt-frill. "I was most anxious to see your lordship——"

"Has anything farther transpired?" demanded the Earl, with an accent and a manner that appeared to indicate a feverish impatience.

"Nothing particular, my lord," returned Mr. Rigden, with his usual sententious coldness. "But your lordship is aware how awkwardly I am situated in respect to your brother, the Lord Raymond Montgomery; and as matters are now coming to a crisis, I wish to know whether your lordship or I shall undertake a journey into Warwickshire to represent to Lord Raymond the absolute necessity of his paying some little attention to the important suit so soon to be decided. I presume your lordship has received no communication from him?"

"None whatever," replied the Earl, gloomily.

"It is now nearly two months, my lord," continued Rigden, "since the Master in Chancery was prepared to deliver his reports in the several matters of 'Montgomery *versus* Bellenden,' 'Raymond Montgomery *versus* Bellenden,' and 'Aylmer *versus* Bellenden.' But inasmuch as we did not then succeed in persuading Lord Raymond to

come up to London and attend to the business—indeed, as the letters which we addressed to him remained altogether unanswered—I was compelled to put in certain affidavits, as your lordship is aware, in order to effect the postponement of the case."

"And the postponement was granted for two months—was it not?" said the Earl of Montgomery, inquiringly.

"Yes, my lord—until the end of May," was the response.

"And that will be in five more days," observed the Earl, in a musing tone. "Well, you had better send off your head clerk into Warwickshire without delay; and if he don't find my brother at Malden Farm, I am sure I do not know where he is to search after him."

"And yet it is of the utmost consequence to *him*, my lord," said Rigden, "that he should be found. You must remember that singular clause in your ancestor's will, under which Lord Raymond claims the Wawickshire estates? If he do not comply with the conditions of that clause on or before the day on which he shall attain his twenty-second year, then does he forfeit all his right and title to those estates. Now, according to his baptismal certificate, he will be twenty-two on the 30th of May; and on the 31st the Master in Chancery will deliver his Report. Should that Report be unfavourable to Lord Raymond's claims altogether, it will of course matter little or nothing whether he has complied with the testamentary conditions, or not: but if the Report should be favourable—and I do not possibly see how it can be otherwise—then will it only remain for me to show the Lord Chancellor that the testamentary conditions aforesaid *have* been complied with."

"And if they have not?" said Lord Montgomery, with a subdued nervousness.

"Why, your lordship knows as well as I do," exclaimed Mr. Rigden, "that in the case you have mentioned, two thirds of the Warwickshire estates would go to Miss Aylmer—or rather Lady Holderness—and one third to you,—that is to say, always supposing that we gain our suit against the Marchioness of Bellenden."

"And of that you have little doubt?" said Lord Montgomery, inquiringly.

"The addditional evidence which you procured about three months ago—when your lordship went into Warwickshire, for the purpose, you know," said the lawyer.

"Yes, yes," exclaimed the Earl, with something like petulance in his tone and manner. "I remember what you mean."

"Well, my lord," continned Rigden, surprised at the nobleman's irritable impetuosity, "the light which you were enabled to throw upon the case, on your return to London, and the subsequent investigations which we caused to be made down in the country, have all produced a visible effect upon the Master's mind and seem to have given a new complexion to the whole matter. Frankly speaking, then, I am sure we shall beat Lady Bellenden as completely and thoroughly as ever a suitor in Chancery was vanquished yet."

"What! beat her on every point?" cried the Earl, joyfully.

"Yes, my lord," answered Rigden: "and now I am proclaiming a positive opinion for the first time. Indeed, it is not my habit to commit myself to my clients by means of pledges and promises. But if I do not beat the Marchioness in respect to your claims—in respect also to Lord Raymond's claims—and lastly, in respect to the claims of Lady Holderness,—then will I consent to be denounced as a fool and branded as a liar."

"I am charmed to hear you speak thus confidently, my dear Rigden," said the Earl: and now his features brightened up, and a gloomy cloud which hung over them when he first entered the lawyer's office, disappeared altogether. "But you will not fail to send off for my brother Raymond?"

"I will despatch my head clerk this very afternoon, my lord," returned the man of business. "He shall start in an hour, and travel post-haste to Malden Farm. If he does not find Lord Raymond there, he will doubtless obtain some tidings concerning him. At all events, we will do our best;—and if the young nobleman is so indifferent to his own interests, as to have gone away and left no clue to his whereabouts, at a time when such an important case is pending,—why, he deserves to lose everything—that's all I can say about it. But still, as the solicitor in this suit, it is my duty to leave no stone unturned in the endeavour to find him out—and that duty shall be performed."

"To be sure—certainly," exclaimed Lord Montgomery. "I will write a letter to my brother; and your clerk can take it with him."

The Earl accordingly sate down and penned a long epistle to Lord Raymond, whom he urged to come up to London without delay. He likewise besought him to forbear in future from treating his relatives with such cruel indifference as he had lately exhibited towards them,—reminding him that more than three months had now elapsed since any tidings had been received from him. The Earl stated that their mother, the Dowager-Countess of Montgomery, was especially hurt at the long and obstinate silence which Raymond had thus preserved: and he concluded by imploring his brother to exert his moral courage and rise superior to the disappointment which he had experienced in respect to their cousin Fernanda.

"There!—will that do?" exclaimed the Earl, throwing the letter across the desk to Mr. Rigden.

"Excellently well, my lord," replied the attorney, who hastily cast his eyes over the contents. "I really had begun to think that your lordship was secretly desirous for your brother to remain absent and leave the testamentary conditions unfulfilled, in order that his heritage might lapse to Lady Holderness and yourself. But now I perceive that I wronged your lordship by the suspicion——"

"You could scarcely deem me guilty of such unkindness, Rigden!" interrupted the Earl, starting from his seat and turning red as a peony: then, with as rapid a transition becoming ghastly pale, he added, in a voice which he vainly essayed to render steady and composed, "Besides, would it not be a palpable folly on my part to prefer my cousin to my brother, even if I had any power to influence the results at all?"

"Well—I should think so, truly," observed Rigden: "it would be a palpable folly indeed. But if I gave your lordship offence by hinting at the suspicions which had been gathering in my mind, I humbly beseech your lordship's pardon."

"Oh! it is granted, Rigden—it is granted," cried the Earl, now recovering his equanimity. "You will let your clerk become the bearer of this letter, then?" he observed, so soon as he had folded, sealed, and addressed the missive.

The attorney responded in the affirmative: and Lord Montgomery took his departure.

"There is something strange—something unaccountable, about my noble client," muttered Mr. Rigden to himself: "and despite of his indignant denial—despite also of the letter which he has written—I still believe my suspicions to be well grounded. He has always been very intimate with his cousin Fernanda—*too* intimate I have sometimes thought. But be all that as it may, I care not. His lordship is one of the best of my clients—and that is the principal point I have to regard."

With this comfortable conclusion, Mr. Rigden rang the bell. The head clerk was summoned into his presence and ordered to make immediate preparations for a journey into the midland counties. The attorney gave him the requisite instructions, letters, and money; and the official departed in a post-chaise for Warwickshire.

Throughout the remainder of the day did Mr. Rigden continue to pore over the documents lying upon his desk; and as the business was now becoming urgent, he stayed at the office long after five o'clock. The head clerk, as we have just described, was absent—and all the others, save Alfred, left the place at the usual hour. The youth however remained to shut up the office.

It was nearly nine o'clock when Mr Rigden took his departure, thoroughly fagged with his fatiguing day's work. No sooner was his back turned, when Alfred rubbed his hands gleefully and appeared scarcely able to restrain his joy within moderate bounds. But having given vent to his exultation, he sate down again and waited a full half-hour ere he took any step in the execution of the project which he had in hand. Then, feeling assured Mr. Rigden was gone for good, and that there was no chance of his return that night, the youth rose from his chair, muttering, "Now is the time!"

The lawyer invariably locked the door of his own private office ere he left, and as regularly took away the key with him. This Alfred of course well knew; and he was prepared to meet the difficulty. Taking a small skeleton key from his pocket, he speedily opened the door; and on entering the private office, he found that all the parchments and papers of any consequence had been removed from the desk. For a moment he was staggered with the fear that Rigden might have carried away the very identical documents which he (Alfred) now required: but a second thought reminded him that such a proceeding was altogether contrary to the lawyer's habit. He accordingly resolved to pick the locks of all the japanned cases in the office, until he should either find the deeds he wanted, or else ascertain that they were not there;—and to work he went, aided by a few little implements which he took from his pocket.

There were altogether about twenty tin boxes in the room, some of them bearing the names of clients, others having no names upon them at all. That of Montgomery did not appear upon any one;—and therefore the youth commenced with the cases which had nothing in the form of nomenclature or initials painted on them. His search was speedily crowned with success; and the coveted documents fell into his hands!

Yes—they were those which he required,—those which he had been instructed to procure,—those, indeed, to which he had heard Caroline Walters so especially allude in the morning!

And now, securing them about his person, the youth hastily quitted the offices, fastening only the outer door, and leaving the key in the lock. He then made the best of his way to Horslydown; and at about half-past ten o'clock, he reached that noted pandemonium—the Beggar's Staff.

The welcome which Alfred received at the hands of Carrotty Poll and the Gallows' Widow, was of the most cordial description. They literally hugged and kissed him in the exuberance of their joy; and Elizabeth Marks assuredly evinced a degree of excitement which was altogether unusual with her.

"Well, this is the finest and most admirable stroke of policy that ever was executed!" she cried, as she glanced at the deeds which Alfred deposited upon the table. "Florimel will reward us munificently!"

"To be sure," observed Carrotty Poll, as she produced a bottle of wine upon the strength of the hoped-for recompense. "Now, take a glass, Alfred—and then tell us how you managed it."

"I suppose you received my note, old gal?" said the youth, whose meekness of manner and humility of tone had apparently been left behind him at the lawyer's office, for the atmosphere of which they had been so successfully assumed.

"Yes—we got the letter, Alf," replied Poll; "and overjoyed we were. Only we had our misgivings, lest you should fail at the very last—or be detected——"

"What a cursed spooney you must take me for," exclaimed the youth, flinging one arm round Carrotty Poll's neck, and the other round the Gallows' Widow's. "No—no: I played my cards better than that, I can tell you. Old Rigden is as cunning as a fox—and I fancied that he looked queer at me once or twice during the day. But never before had he entertained the least suspicion that I wasn't all right—even if he did up to the very last moment."

"And how came you to discover the deeds today?" demanded Poll.

"Oh! a young fellow came—a midshipman-looking chap—to see the guv'ner," replied Alfred; "and I happened to go into the inner office with a message, just at the moment that the visitor said, *'I see that you have got the Florimel documents all before you.'* So then I ascertained for the first time that the papers *were* there; and I do believe that the young middy noticed the satisfaction which I felt burning as it were upon my face. Having once made sure of the grand point which I had been endeavouring to arrive at from the very first moment I entered Rigden's service, I knew that the rest was plain-sailing. So I seized an opportunity to write you off a note; and, in a word, I have fulfilled my mission."

"Ah! see what it is to have nice-mannered and well educated young gents like you enlisted in our service," said Carrotty Poll. "If you'd never run away from school and fallen in with the Kinchin-Grand, you wouldn't have performed this glorious feat, you see—and you certainly wouldn't have earned the twenty guineas I promised you."

"And which you may now pay me, Poll," exclaimed the youth: "for I mean to have a regular lark along with the Kinchin-Grand until it is all gone—and then you must find me something else to do."

"To be sure!" returned the Big Beggarman's daughter. "But you must remain very quiet for a few days, Alf, for fear Rigden should raise the hue and cry and advertise the job. You shall however have your money at once—because fair play is fair play."

"Ah! that's true enough," observed the young spark, as he consigned to his pocket the twenty guineas which Carrotty Poll forthwith counted down upon the table.

"And now let us lock up these deeds for to-night," said the Gallows' Widow: "and to-morrow morning early we'll call at Lord Florimel's and see if he has come back to town. If not, we'll post down to Dover and see him there."

CHAPTER CCXIII.

THE RECONCILIATION.

Once more do we find the sisters Octavia and Pauline reunited. In pursuance of the hint which she had received from the Kinchin-Grand, relative to the mode of effecting Octavia's liberation from the madhouse, Pauline had proceeded thither and demanded an interview with Dr. Burton, the proprietor of the asylum. To this individual the courageous and intrepid young lady had declared her resolution of at once applying to a magistrate unless her sister was released without a moment's delay; and the doctor, trembling at the prospect of exposure, and perceiving that Pauline was aware of the foul conspiracy of which Octavia was the victim, not only hastened to submit to her demand, but besought her in the most grovelling terms to pardon him for the share he had taken in the matter. Pauline was too much delighted at the restoration of her sister to freedom, not to deal mercifully with the suppliant doctor; and moreover, it was altogether foreign to her wishes to adopt any measure that was calculated to give publicity to Octavia's disgrace.

The sisters, then, were reunited after a cruel separation of a month and upwards; and the tranquillity of a few days' enjoyment of home, together with the affectionate ministrations and tender endearments lavished upon her by Pauline, again worked a striking and manifest improvement in the mental condition of Octavia. Still, however, did her countenance wear an expression of settled melancholy; and still was there an occasional vacancy in her looks, as if her memory failed her at intervals or grew cloudy and bewildered as she sought to fix her ideas upon some special point.

It was about noon—on the day following the occurrences related in the four preceding chapters—and the sisters were seated in their handsomely-furnished parlour. Octavia was half reclining upon the sofa—Pauline occupied a chair near the window, and was working. The former was gazing intently upon a sprig of lilac which she held in her fair hand, and was weaving with her somewhat confused thoughts the associations which the flower conjured up relative to the blooming of fond hopes to-day and their withering to-morrow;—while the younger sister was thinking of Lord Florimel and marvelling uneasily why he had not answered the letter which she had written to him a few days previously to Dover.

Suddenly the gate of the little garden in front of the house creaked upon its hinges; and the look which Pauline flung forth, encountered the glance of Lord Florimel. Rapture, hope, and suspense were depicted upon his features: but the colour instantaneously fled from the cheeks of Pauline and a sensation of dizziness came over her—for now that the moment so anxiously expected had arrived and they were about to meet again, she knew not how to receive him. The whole details of the masquerade scene came back, vivid in colouring and poignant in effect, to her memory: she still believed in his perfidy—and yet she felt that she must yield him her forgiveness!

The double knock at the door resounded through the house: and Octavia started nervously.

"Oh! if that were the Prince, come to implore my pardon!" she exclaimed, trembling all over with the fever of excitement.

"No—my dearest sister—that will never happen—and you are wrong to indulge the hope, poor girl!" said Pauline. "But if it were ——"

"Then I would forgive him!" ejaculated Octavia, with impassioned accent.

It appeared as if an angel's voice had suddenly answered, by means of Octavia's lips, the question which Pauline was mooting in the recesses of her own heart with regard to Florimel; and the thought flashed to her mind in a moment, that if her sister who was so deeply injured would forgive the author of her wrongs, it was assuredly incumbent upon herself to pardon the comparatively venial offences of which Florimel had been guilty towards her.

With the speed of lightning did this reflection traverse her imagination;—and the next moment the handsome and graceful Gabriel burst into the room. The impulse which urged Pauline at the instant was entirely in his favour: the frank and ingenuous remark of Octavia had dispelled all hesitation on the side of the young maiden—and the lovers precipitated themselves into each other's arms.

"Dearest, dearest Pauline!" exclaimed Florimel: "at length we meet again!"

"And the past is forgotten, Gabriel," murmured the young lady, as she gave back the joyous and enraptured kisses which the nobleman imprinted upon her lips, her cheeks, and her brow.

Octavia clasped her hands together fervently, and the tears ran down her cheeks: but it was through joy—through emotions of gladness at the spectacle of her sister's happiness,—and this was the first real gleam of sunshine that had dawned upon the soul of the unfortunate young lady since the dreadful day on which the full measure of the Prince's perfidy became known to her.

When the first ebullition of feeling on the part of Florimel and Pauline was over, the nobleman paid his respects to Octavia, whom he treated with the affectionate interest and kind sympathy which a brother would devote to a cherished but afflicted sister: then, seating himself by the side of Pauline, he took her hand—pressed it to his lips—and

gazed long and tenderly upon her charming countenance.

"Oh! my beloved," he whispered at length in her ear, "there have been sad and dreadful misunderstandings between us: but let them be all cleared up now, and then forgotten for ever. They told me that you were married—that the account of your wedding was in the newspaper——"

"Who could possibly have deceived you thus, Gabriel?" inquired Pauline, amazed at the announcement thus made her.

"A person who was interested in deluding and persecuting me, my angel," answered the young nobleman: and as he still gazed on the lovely features of Pauline, he wondered how he could ever have been mad, base, and besotted enough to have dreamt of sacrificing the amiable virgin for the unknown woman of gallantry and pleasure. "But tell me, my charmer—tell me, my adored one—wherefore you so suddenly broke off everything between us?"

"Does not your own conscience answer the question, Gabriel?" said Pauline, in a low tone of upbraiding, while her countenance suddenly became serious and mournful. "Ah! I have consented to forgive you this once—for the last time:—but do not affect ignorance, instead of manifesting contrition!"

"Pauline," replied the young nobleman, with the impassioned accents and fervid manner of unmistakable sincerity, "your words are but a continuation of that dreadful enigma which has so much perplexed me and almost driven me to despair. If I have erred *since* that day on which you wrote to tell me that everything was at an end between us, my offence must be looked upon with a compassionate consideration, because your own inexplicable conduct was but too well calculated to plunge me into any excesses that might divert my mind from pondering on its blasted hopes and its stricken affections. But until that letter came, I take God to witness that I was true and faithful in word and deed unto you——"

"O Gabriel! add not this perjury to your other offences," exclaimed Pauline, emphatically: "or I shall withdraw my promise of pardon—I shall refuse all reconciliation!"

"Then, in the name of God! explain yourself," cried Florimel, with a vehemence equally impassioned,—"in order that I may enter upon my justification! You cannot, at least, refuse me that demand?"

"One word will suffice, Gabriel," said Pauline, in a tone profoundly mournful: then, in a scarcely audible whisper, she added, "I fancied that you could not have been at a loss to conjecture who the Flower Girl was at the Masquerade."

"By heaven! this enigma is intolerable—this mystery is more than I can endure!" exclaimed the young nobleman, completely bewildered. "Ah! I recollect," he cried, as a sudden reminiscence struck him: "I *was* invited to a masquerade at Covent Garden theatre—but I take God to witness that I did not go!"

"Then has there been some foul treachery played upon me!" said Pauline, staggered and confounded by the air of sincerity and the tone of confidence with which her lover's denial was given. "And, to speak candidly," she continued, in a musing tone, "I was struck *then*—at the time—by the circumstance that the masque in the blue domino with the braiding and the star, was taller than you——"

"A blue domino—braiding—and star!" ejaculated Florimel, now more bewildered and mystified than ever. "Yes—I know of such a domino—it was sent to me—but I commanded my page to destroy it! Oh! I begin to see through all this hideous misunderstanding," he cried, suddenly struck by the conviction that some dark scheme of treachery, unsuspected by him until this very moment, had been pepetrated by Rao—*alias* Caroline Walters—through the agency of the blue domino. "Perhaps it was not destroyed after all—and another person may have used it——"

"Oh! if such were indeed the case, Florimel," interrupted Pauline, now dreadfully agitated,—"then have I done you a cruel injustice—wronged you by the vilest suspicions—and behaved towards you with a precipitation and an inconsiderateness which you can never overlook!"

"Never overlook!" repeated Gabriel, in an impassioned tone. "There is nothing you can do towards me, beloved Pauline, that I am not prepared to pardon—because I have so much for which to ask forgiveness of you!"

And the young nobleman sank upon his knees at her feet.

"Rise—Oh! rise, my well-beloved Gabriel!" exclaimed the beauteous virgin, starting from her seat, a prey to the wildest agitation: then, as she abandoned her hand to the nobleman who still knelt before her, she said with exceeding bitterness of tone, "Ah! I was too hasty—yes, too precipitate: and I was sealing my own unhappiness at the same time that I was causing yours. But you will forgive me, Gabriel—you will forgive me——"

"Oh! let us grant mutual pardon, my angel—my beauty—my adored!" cried Florimel, springing from his suppliant position and snatching the heavenly being to his breast.

"Yes—pardon each other, whatever ills you may have done," said Octavia, rising from the sofa, and approaching the tender pair: then suddenly bursting into tears, she cried, "Oh! that the false Prince would come and demand pardon of *me*!"

Pauline and Gabriel now devoted themselves to the task of soothing Octavia's abruptly awakened grief; and leading her back to the sofa, they said all they could to afford her solace and sympathy. In a few minutes they succeeded in calming the afflicted young lady;—and when they saw that the violence of the storm had thus passed, they returned to the seats which they had previously occupied at the other end of the room.

"And now, my Pauline," said Lord Florimel, "will you explain to me all that is still bewildering and mysterious to me, relative to the blue domino?"

"Read this letter," observed the younger Miss Clarendon, producing the document from a desk which stood upon a table close by; "and you will then judge what my feelings must have been."

"Ah! it is as I thought!" ejaculated the nobleman, instantaneously recognising the handwriting of Caroline Walters.

He then ran his eyes hastily over the contents of the letter, which has already been given in the hundred and forty-ninth chapter of our narrative,

but which we shall reproduce in this place, as the precise terms in which it was worded may have escaped the memory of the reader:—

"Lord Florimel is unfaithful to you. While affecting a complete reformation in his conduct, his private life is as profligate as ever; but his intrigues are carried on with a greater circumspection. To-morrow night he will be present at a masquerade at Covent Garden Theatre, disguised in a blue domino edged with a peculiar braiding and having a star of the same material on the top or crown of the hood. The object of his visit to that scene is a new love-intrigue; and you may convince yourself with your own eyes that such is the fact. The writer of this note is animated by no other desire than a sincere wish to prevent so much virtue, generous confidence, amiability, and candour being sacrificed to such profound hypocrisy, such foul deceit, and such unpardonable treachery: for by all *those* virtues are you characterised—and by all *these* faults is Lord Florimel distinguished.

"Well aware that you are so utterly unacquainted with all the arts of London dissipation, as to be ignorant even how to proceed in order to procure at so short a notice a suitable disguise for the purpose which this letter naturally suggests, the writer has made the necessary arrangements at a respectable fancy-dress warehouse in London (the card of which is enclosed). The mistress of the establishment will have a chamber prepared for you to perform your toilette in the strictest privacy; and you can proceed thence in a hackney-coach to the theatre, which is at no great distance from the warehouse.

"One word more. The writer positively and earnestly enjoins you not to address a syllable of reproach to Lord Florimel within the walls of the theatre. You are even forbidden to accost him in a manner that may enable him to guess who you are. On the contrary, you must restrain your feelings and take time to deliberate upon the proper course to be subsequently pursued."

"That last paragraph, Pauline," exclaimed Lord Florimel, indignantly, when he had terminated the perusal of the letter, "must serve to convince you that I was *not* the wearer of the blue domino at the masquerade. Read it—examine it thoroughly: see how carefully it is worded—and how energetic is the caution that it conveys! Why were you not to address the wearer of the blue domino in a manner that would provoke reply? Because any conversation that might have occurred between you, would have led to the discovery that a scandalous trick had been practised upon you and that I was *not* the masque whom you accosted."

"Yes—the truth is apparent *now*, Gabriel," said Pauline, fixing her eyes tenderly upon her lover: "and again do I implore your pardon for the readiness with which I yielded to the suspicions so wickedly excited and so artfully maintained. And now that I bethink me, there was a female masque, disguised as a Gipsy, who accosted me on that memorable evening and avowed the authorship of the anonymous letter. I questioned her concerning the motive which had induced her to warn me against holding any discourse with the Blue Domino; and I remember that her tone was ferocious, vindictive, and malignant in the extreme, as she replied that those were *her* secrets! Moreover, it was she herself who deliberately suggested the very terms in which I ought to convey to you the intimation that everything was at an end between us."

"The wretch!" murmured Florimel, between his set teeth. "But did you catch a glimpse of her countenance?" he inquired.

"I noticed that she had fine dark eyes, which flashed through the holes of her mask," said Pauline,—"brilliant teeth and black hair. Her stature was short; but she was gracefully formed—and she was evidently quite young."

"Enough!" exclaimed Florimel: "'tis she—the unfortunate girl——and I merited all her vindictiveness! But once more do I fall upon my knees in your presence, Pauline," he cried in an impassioned tone; "and never shall I rise until I have confessed my errors—my misdeeds—and received your full pardon!"

"No, Gabriel—you shall make no confession to me!" exclaimed the generous hearted Pauline. "Rise—I will not listen to one word of self-crimination from your lips. I have been harsh—precipitate—unkind towards you in one respect; and you have forgiven me. Shall I be less considerate on your behalf? Besides, I can already divine the truth in reference to the vindictive young woman who achieved so much mischief and who personated the Gipsy at the masquerade. She was doubtless one who has good cause to deplore a broken pledge on your part;—and it will now be our duty to seek her—console and propitiate her—and ensure her a competency, if she be poor, for the remainder of her days."

"Ah! you know not of whom you are speaking, Pauline!" exclaimed Florimel. "Do you remember the dreadful murder that was committed in Lambeth some two or three months back? Well, that same Caroline Walters—the murderess—is the young woman whom you would console and propitiate—and she was arrested last evening!"

"Oh! the unhappy girl!" cried Pauline, clasping her hands and shuddering visibly. "And that infamous woman—the milliner of Pall Mall—was also taken into custody, I have heard—charged with crimes that are almost incredible——"

"But which appear, notwithstanding, to be conclusively brought home to her," added Florimel. "Let us not, however, devote a word or a thought to any one or anything, unless connected with our own affairs—for *these* must now be the all-engrossing topic. Yes, Pauline," continued the young nobleman, still remaining upon his knees before her, and speaking in a voice of the deepest contrition,—"I betrayed that young girl—that Caroline Walters——and hence the fearful revenge which she has sought to wreak upon me, by alienating your affections from me for ever! It is true that she became my victim before I was even acquainted with you: but can you—will you bestow your hand on one who has erred so deeply as I?"

"The candour of this confession, Gabriel, permits me not to hesitate a moment how to answer you," said Pauline. "Oh! surely, surely you are repentant for the past——"

"God knows how penitent I am!" ejaculated the young nobleman, fervidly. "But it is for you, Pauline, to become my guardian angel—my saving genius; and I will reward you with a love as unbounded and a fidelity as true as your virtues merit!"

"Rise—rise, my Gabriel—and be happy!" exclaimed Pauline, forcing the young nobleman to abandon his suppliant posture. "There—seat yourself by my side—and let me hear you converse without an excitement that is painful to us both. The past cannot be recalled—but it may be atoned

for, perhaps;—and contrition is the first step towards expiation."

"You are an angel, Pauline!" cried Florimel, straining the lovely girl to his breast. "But you little know what remarkable vicissitudes I have experienced since last we met. Disguised as a black page, did Caroline Walters enter my service, with a view to achieve my ruin by any means that should present themselves or under any circumstances that might arise to favour her designs. Thus was it that she was enabled to purloin from me certain documents, the loss of which menaced my peerage and my fortune. But the papers were restored to me this morning, Pauline—and I can still place a coronet upon thy brow and make thee the sharer of my wealth! And this reminds me that the persons through whose agency I regained possession of my deeds, are the same who delivered you the other day from the power of that vilest of miscreants—the Prince of Wales. Yes—I have this morning heard all that happened beneath the roof of your treacherous neighbours, the Pages;—and you may readily imagine how great was my surprise—how infinite my joy, when I learnt that you were residing once more in the very dwelling where we first became acquainted. I lost no time in coming hither, Pauline: and the hopes which animated me, have not been disappointed——for, heaven be praised! we are reconciled once more!"

"And it shall be your fault, my Gabriel, if any farther misunderstanding takes place between us," said Pauline, bending her beauteous eyes affectionately upon her lover's handsome countenance: "for, on my part, I can securely promise that never again will I yield to unconfirmed suspicions or presumptive evidence——"

"Oh! the noblest feelings are of a jealous nature, my Pauline!" exclaimed Florimel; "and unless you had loved me tenderly you would not have resented my supposed infidelity severely."

"I am grateful to thee, Gabriel," whispered Pauline, "for thus finding an extenuation for my injurious, rash, and precipitate conduct towards thee. But tell me—who could that individual have been who wore the blue domino and personated yourself at the masquerade?"

"Doubtless some accomplice in Caroline Walters' scheme of revenge," replied Florimel. "And now let us avert our eyes as much as possible from the past, and think only of the present—yes, and of the future also," he added, pressing the maiden's hand to his lips. "It is for you, Pauline," he continued, in a low and tender tone, "to settle the day which will render us both happy—unite us, never more to separate—and, while bestowing upon me a husband's right to protect and cherish you, afford me also a brother's privilege to watch over and console your afflicted and deeply-wronged sister."

Then, with melting looks and blushing cheeks, the charming maiden murmured a few words in her lover's ear;—and doubtless the response which they conveyed to his solicitation was agreeable to his hopes and wishes—for he once more caught her in his arms, strained her to his breast, and covered her cheeks with kisses.

CHAPTER CCXIV.

AN EXPLOSION AMONGST THE NEW LIGHTS.

WHILE the preceding scene was taking place at the corner house in the genteel little row known as Paradise Villas, the occupants of the dwelling a couple of doors off were playing their part in a somewhat less agreeable drama at the Police Court in Bow Street, Covent Garden.

The reader has probably borne in mind the circumstance that when Mr. Page introduced himself on the first occasion to Carlton Palace, he informed the Prince of Wales that, on taking a house in Paradise Villas, he found out that the Honourable Misses Clarendon dwelt on one side, and the Reverend Mr. Sneaksby on the other side of his new abode.

Such was indeed the fact: for the esteemed and estimable pastor of the New Lights, accompanied by his admired and admirable friend Mr. Ichabod Paxwax, had transferred their quarters from the establishment of Mrs. Piggleberry in Jermyn Street to the beautiful suburban villa aforesaid. The worthy dame was of course well aware that these chosen vessels had thus removed to the Edgeware Road, inasmuch as she had given them a highly satisfactory character when referred to by the landlord of their new tenement: but she was *not* equally well informed in respect to the fact that they had enticed her niece, the pretty Ann Jones, to follow them secretly thither and undertake the duties of housekeeper. In plain terms, the niece was found to be missing a few days after the removal of the pious gentlemen; and her parents, from whose home she had fled, together with her aunt, at whose house she had been a constant visitress, were overwhelmed with sorrow and cruelly perplexed at her sudden disappearance.

Indeed, there was some cause for suspecting that the young woman had experienced foul play; inasmuch as, at the period of her flight, she was passing a few days with her aunt, by whom she was sent out to liquidate some little accounts that were owing in the neighbourhood, and for which purpose a ten-pound note was given to her. But she never returned; and, on subsequent inquiry, it proved that she had not paid the debts at all, nor even visited the shops where the accounts were owing. She had been home to her parents' abode for a few minutes, to put on her best clothes and procure her father's umbrella: but from the moment she started forth again, all trace was lost of her. Her father, mother, and aunt had therefore naturally experienced much alarm and uneasiness on her account; and all the researches and inquiries which they set afoot proved unavailing. The neighbours shook their heads and observed significantly that "Miss Ann was a pretty girl, and she knew it:" some added that "she was a thorough coquette and given to fine dressing lately;"—and others ventured to prophecy that "she would come back again when she wanted the widwife's assistance." But her parents and aunt turned a deaf ear to these remarks: they could not possibly think that Ann had gone astray after becoming a member of the New Lights: nor did it for a moment strike these worthy people that she had been allured away by the odour of sanctity which attended like a halo upon the persons of the Reverend Nathaniel Sneaksby and Brother Paxwax.

Thus several weeks had passed, during which Ann Jones was pleasantly and comfortably employed in discharging the duties of housekeeper at the new dwelling where the chosen vessels had established themselves in Paradise Villas. But it happened at last—indeed, early in the very morning of the day on which Florimel and Pauline were reunited—that Mr. Jones, Ann's respected father and consequently Mrs. Piggleberry's beloved brother, was passing along the Edgeware Road,—when, to his infinite surprise, he beheld his daughter taking in the hot rolls at Mr. Sneaksby's front door! The ejaculation of wonder which burst from his lips at this discovery, met the ears of Miss Ann Jones; and, instantaneously recognising her sire, she dropped the rolls as if they were scorpions—stepped back into the house—and slammed the door in the face of the astonished baker, who naturally thought that the Reverend Mr. Sneaksby's confidential domestic had suddenly gone mad.

But Mr. Jones, to whose comprehension all the perfidy of the pious gentlemen suddenly became clear and apparent as day-light, was resolved to recover his daughter: and rushing up the steps, he began to knock furiously at the front-door. For some time no regard was paid to his noisy summons: and therefore he continued to knock, and, knock, as if inspired with a determination to break in the door on the one hand and arouse the whole neighbourhood on the other. Doubtless both these catastrophes were at last apprehended by the inmates of the house; and they therefore thought it prudent to capitulate. Accordingly, Mr. Ichabod Paxwax opened the door and besought Mr. Jones to step in and "settle the matter amicably:" but Mr. Jones being a very passionate individual, was not to be soothed or coaxed by the bland appeal of the chosen vessel. He therefore preferred taking his stand on the threshold, and bawling out to his daughter to come forth from "that den of hypo-

crisy." Awfully scandalised at this proceeding, Brother Paxwax used every endeavour to pacify the irate Mr. Jones: but Mr. Jones was not to be pacified at any price short of the surrender of his daughter—and as this consummation did not appear to be nigh at hand, he continued to bawl and vociferate more lustily than ever. The Reverend Mr. Sneaksby accordingly came forth to see what effect *his* eloquence would have in the matter: and he began by denying in the most positive terms that Ann Jones was in his house at all, alleging that he certainly possessed a maid-servant very much like her, but whose name was Mary Smith. For a few moments Mr. Jones was staggered, and really began to think it just possible that he had made a mistake: but all on a sudden he caught sight of an umbrella—*his own umbrella*—which he instantaneously recognised as the one that his daughter had taken away with her on the day of her disappearance. Bounding into the passage like an infuriate bull-dog, Mr. Jones seized upon the umbrella, and therewith set to work to belabour the Reverend Mr. Sneaksby so unmercifully, that the pious vessel was covered all over with bruises before he had even time to raise an arm in self-defence. Mr. Paxwax roared out "Murder!"—and Mr. Sneaksby vociferated "Fire!" or anything else that came to the tip of his tongue. Then, in the midst of the fracas, Ann Jones—the fair, but frail Ann Jones herself—emerged, shrieking and screaming, from the back parlour: the whole neighbourhood was alarmed—the constables were sent for—and the upshot was that Mr. Jones, his daughter, and the two influential leaders of the New Lights, together with the umbrella, were all ignominiously bundled into a hackney-coach which was passing at the time, and in this manner duly conveyed to Bow Street.

Immediately upon their arrival at the police-office, Mr. Jones despatched a messenger to Jermyn Street, to inform Mrs. Piggleberry of what had occurred and obtain her attendance at the forthcoming examination; and the case was accordingly kept back until the worthy woman's arrival. The parties were then introduced to the notice of the magistrate; and a very singular appearance they made.

In the first place the Reverend Mr. Sneaksby put on his longest, demurest, and most puritanically miserable look,—screwing up his mouth, and yet drawing down his chin at the same time—an operation which only gentlemen of his class can ever hope to succeed in accomplishing. Secondly, that excellent creature Brother Paxwax assumed a demeanour so resigned and so expressive of injured innocence, that had it not seemed most sublimely ridiculous in connexion with his rubicund countenance and brandy-loving looks, it doubtless would have produced the desired effect. Thirdly, there was Mr. Jones, with a fierce aspect and a stern demeanour, ready to pitch into anybody or everybody at the slightest provocation, and bestowing irate glances upon the pious vessels and his frail daughter by turns. Fourthly, there was the young female herself—abashed, trembling, and looking as if she entertained a vague apprehension of speedily becoming better acquainted with Bridewell than she as yet was. Lastly, we must observe that poor Mrs. Piggleberry, standing apart from the rest, appeared the very picture of woe and seemed intent on the process of inflaming her right eye with the corner of her apron.

The two leaders of the New Lights, Mr. Jones, and his daughter, were all placed at the bar, charged with fighting, creating a disturbance, and alarming the neighbourhood in which the occurrence took place: but the magistrate had not entered very far into an investigation of the affair, before he obtained sufficient insight into its origin and nature to determine him to dismiss the charge and place the whole ground-work of the proceedings upon another footing.

"Now, Mr. Jones," he said, "you complain that Nathaniel Sneaksby and Ichabod Paxwax have enticed your daughter away from home—is it not so?"

"Yes, your worship," replied the individual thus addressed: "and if that isn't a reason why I should punch their heads——"

"Hush! hush!" ejaculated the magistrate: "we know nothing of punching heads here—or rather, we know too much of it in the cases that come before us. But what age is your daughter, Mr Jones?"

"Turned of twenty, your worship," was the answer: "and if that isn't an age when she ought to know better, I'm cursed if I——"

"Hush! hush!" interposed the functionary on the bench. "You must not make use of such language, or I shall fine you five shillings. I want to do you justice—for I see that you have been ill-treated: but you should curb your temper."

"The man of Belial!" moaned Mr. Sneaksby, first bending his eyes with an expression of sorrowful reproach upon Mr. Jones, and then turning up the said eyes like a duck in a thunder-storm.

"The man of wrath!" groaned Mr. Paxwax, imitating his reverend leader as much as possible, alike in tone and looks.

"Silence!" exclaimed the usher of the court, sharply.

"What saith that Philistine, Brother Paxwax?" asked Mr. Sneaksby, assuming the martyrized air of a saint.

"That we must bridle our tongues, Brother Sneaksby," was the lugubrious response.

"Silence!" once more ejaculated the usher.

"Please your washup," observed Mrs. Piggleberry, imagining that this was the very best time for her to state what she knew of the matter,—"them two unsavoury wessels has debauched and ruinated the poor gal which I loved as well as if she was my own mother—leastways, my darter, I should say——"

"Oh! aunt," exclaimed Miss Ann Jones, under the impression that she could do nothing better than get up a little scene, and perhaps go into hysterics by way of a finale,—"I know that I've been very ungrateful — very undu-u-tiful to both fa-a-ther and yourself-elf," she continued in a whimpering tone; "but it was all along of that tall hypocrite there——"

"Sister Ann, sister Ann!" exclaimed Mr. Sneaksby, in a tone of mild rebuke, as the girl pointed her left hand towards him while she held her apron up to her eyes with her right. "Have I not been even as a brother unto thee——"

"Yea, verily—and as a husband too," added Mr. Paxwax, thinking to aid his leader's cause by the remark.

"I've not the slightest doubt about it," observed

the magistrate, drily. "But this young woman is twenty years of age, and therefore able to take care of herself. The charge of abduction will not stand; and unless you can show me, Mr. Jones, that when your daughter was enticed away, she took some of your property with her, and that such property is now beneath the roof of these persons——"

"To be sure!" ejaculated Jones. "My umbrella——"

"And my ten-pound note!" exclaimed Mrs. Piggleberry.

"Oh! the filthy lucre!" moaned Mr. Sneaksby, raising his eyes and hands, as if in appeal to heaven.

"Oh! the base cotton umbrella!" groaned Mr. Paxwax, in the deep trouble of his spirit.

"Yes—but we must hear a little more of these things," said the magistrate, who was evidently bent upon punishing the New Light leaders if he possibly could manage it. "And first about the ten-pound note, as that is the most serious?"

"Well, sir, I'll confess everything—please, sir—that I will—if you won't hurt me," exclaimed Ann Jones, now crying in bitter reality—for she saw that the affair was every instant becoming more and more serious.

"That's right—tell the truth, gal," said Mrs. Piggleberry; "and his washup won't do you no harm."

"Oh! aunt," cried the young woman, reproachfully, "it was all your fault that ever I went among them New Lights—and you've brought me to this," she added, sobbing grievously.

"Cuss the New Lights!" ejaculated Mrs. Piggleberry, darting furious glances at Mr. Sneaksby and Mr. Paxwax, who stood gazing upon the magistrate with the meek and sanctimonious air of outraged innocence resigned to all its wrongs.

"Now if all this isn't a reason," exclaimed Mr. Jones, who was very fond of introducing his remarks in those terms, "to make one ready to knock these fellows' heads together——"

"Hush! we can have no knocking of heads here!" cried the magistrate. "Now, madam," he continued, turning towards Mrs. Piggleberry; "tell me about that ten-pound note."

"I will, sir—and I won't deceive you," said the good woman, with a curtsey. "Please your worship, I'm a respectable widder which rents a house in Jermyn Street, and pays rent and taxes as reglar as quarter-days and collectors comes round. I gets my living by lodgings—leastways, by taking in gentlemen and doing for them—which is the way I come to have them sneaking waggabones a-living in my house and okkipying rooms that I might have let to their betters. But I've found 'em out now, the canting humbugs!"

"The poor benighted creature is in wrath," moaned Mr. Sneaksby.

"And, verily, she revileth us," groaned Mr. Paxwax.

"We are in the hands of the ungodly, brother," sighed his Reverence.

"Yea—in the power of the men of Belial," gasped Ichabod.

"Forty stripes save one shalt thou have on thine hide, friend Paxwax," whispered the former.

"And a night and a day shalt thou sit in the stocks, friend Sneaksby," murmured the latter.

"Come—cease that talking!" cried the magistrate. "And now about this ten-pound note?"

"Please your washup," resumed Mrs. Piggleberry, with another curtsey, "I'll tell the truth. It was a new note—bran new, as one may say—not a bit soiled in any one place, and crisp-like to the touch. Well, your washup, I gives it to my niece there; and, '*Ann*,' I says, says I, '*you'll just step round to the tradesmen and pay the week's bills*,' says I.—'*Yes, aunt*,' she says, says she, '*I will*.' —'*Do, Ann*,' says I; and I gives her the ten-pound note. Away she trots; and I goes down into the kitchen to cook some liver and bacon for my dinner—for I'm exceedin' fond of liver and bacon, your washup—besides its being cheap——"

"The flesh-pots of Egypt," groaned Mr. Sneaksby, smacking his lips.

"A savoury mess, such as Ichabod loveth," moaned Mr. Paxwax.

"But I always puts an ing'un into the gravy, please your washup," continued Mrs. Piggleberry; "and if your washup will only tell your cook the next time——"

"The ten-pound note!" exclaimed the magistrate, impatiently. "This is not a case of liver and bacon, my good woman."

"No more it isn't," said Mrs. Piggleberry, seriously; though with a dubious look and mystic shake of her head, as if she were not quite sure that the dish in question had not something to do with the matter. "Well, your washup, I gave the girl the ten-pound note——"

"And I gave it to Mr. Sne-eaks-by," said Ann Jones, whimpering. "It was agreed that I should leave home and go and live at his new house after a little while: but I wasn't to follow him directly, for fear that mother and father and aunt should suspect where I'd gone. But when I got the ten pounds, I thought it was the best time to go to him—as I could keep the money to buy clothes with. But I didn't buy clothes—for Mr. Sneaksby was very short at the time, and when he knew that I had the note he asked me to give it to him. He said the Lord had need of it."

"Oh, Ann, thou canst not say that I took thy shekels of gold!" observed the reverend gentleman, with a solemn shake of the head, and an awful elongation of the countenance.

"Nor the shekels of silver," added Paxwax, in a sombre tone.

"Yes, you did, though," cried Ann, tartly: "and you both got so tipsy the same night, that I was ashamed of you. But these two fellows, your worship, were always drinking; and they sometimes used me very badly. I should have run away from them, only I'd no place to go to; for I didn't dare return home. And now that everything has come out at last, I don't mind telling all I know of them. They're a scandalous pair of impostors, and that's what they are!" added Miss Jones, working herself up into a fury.

"Sister Ann, sister Ann!" exclaimed Mr. Sneaksby, shaking his forefinger at the young woman; "thou wilt repent of this ingratitude to one who hath been a kind master and a loving brother unto thee!"

"Oh! do send him to prison, your worship," cried the girl, whimpering once more; "for he seduced me, he did; he made me go astray; and if father will take me home again, I'll be good and steady in future."

"Well, young woman," remarked the magistrate, "we shall see what your father says presently. And now answer me one or two questions. Did Sneaksby know how you came by the ten pounds that you gave him?"

"To be sure he did, your worship," was the reply. "I told him that aunt gave it to me, and he said the Lord had need of it. So I handed it over to him. He'd such power over me then, he had!"

"And has he ever paid you any portion of it back again?" inquired the magistrate.

"Not a farthing, your worship,—although he's had plenty of money since, from Salem and other places. And, what's more, the New Lights are building him and Brother Paxwax both beautiful houses ——"

"If this isn't a reason to make your worship send these rascals to prison, I'll be hanged if I know what would," exclaimed Mr. Jones. "As for my daughter, I'll take her home again and forgive her this time——"

"And I won't do it no more, father," cried Ann, turning in an appealing manner towards her parent. "But will mother forgive me?"

"Yes, yes—it shall be all right," answered her father.

"Come, don't cry, my love," whispered Mrs. Piggleberry, in a soothing tone. "I know it was all my fault for taking you to Salem and throwing you in the way of them New Lights. A precious state of grease they've brought you to after all."

"Now, one more question, young woman," said the magistrate. "Was the prisoner Paxwax cognisant of the affair of the ten-pound note?"

"He knew all about it, your worship," replied Ann Jones; "in fact, it was him that went and changed it the moment I gave it to them."

"That will do," observed the magistrate; "we need not go into the case of the umbrella. Now, prisoners, what have you to say in your defence?"

"Verily, the young woman hath spoken falsely," said the Reverend Nathaniel Sneaksby, in his habitual canting drone; "and thou, O righteous judge! wilt not be swayed by Satan to do evil unto me. Never received I aught from the young woman; neither shekels of gold, nor shekels of silver; and as toucheth her chastity, if she be not a virgin, of a surety it is not I that have defiled her. I took her as mine handmaiden, to serve and minister unto me, at a wage of three pounds for each fourth part of a year. And forasmuch as she hath not yet tarried with me so long a period as three months, verily is her wage not due till the term cometh. She is wroth against me, because I have rebuked her for her too great forwardness touching a certain ungodly vessel whom men do call the pot-boy at the public-house which is nearest unto my abode. But I yield her my forgiveness: nay, more—I will even pay her her wage, albeit though not yet due——and I will send for Brother Unthank Snag and Brother Crick, and bid them come with money in their hands that they may present unto this widow the ten shekels which her niece did take from her. This will I do, thou interpreter of the law!" added Mr. Sneaksby, apostrophizing the magistrate; "so that there may be peace between us and I may gird up my loins and depart!"

"Amen!" said Ichabod Paxwax, in a deep solemn tone.

"Have you anything to urge in your own behalf?" demanded the magistrate of this latter individual.

"I have said it," was the response.

"Then shall I proceed to adjudicate summarily in this matter," continued the magistrate. "It is through the vile hypocrisy, the wretched cant, and the foul immoralities of such men as yourselves, that the cause of true religion is injured. I care not whether an individual be a member of the Established Church, a Dissenter, or a Catholic: so long as he is sincere, honest, and true in his professions and his practice, he is worthy of esteem and respect. Indeed, I am well aware that taking the whole body of Dissenters generally, they are in every way deserving of admiration and praise. But there are hypocrites, Maw-worms, false prophets, and canting impostors in all sects and all creeds; and under the respectable cloak of Dissent, do cheats and counterfeits like you, prisoners at the bar, succeed in preying upon the credulous and unwary, the weak-minded and the ignorant. Your offence against society is all the greater, because you are the real wolves in sheep's clothing of whom the holy scriptures speak. You assume the most sacred characters, in order to conceal the most depraved courses and the most dissolute lives. Society must be protected against such men—true religion shall not be outraged with impunity. I therefore sentence you each to three months' imprisonment as rogues and vagabonds. Clear the court!"

The Reverend Mr. Sneaksby threw up his arms in dismay, while Brother Paxwax fell on his knees and began to blubber like a school-boy. But the magistrate was inexorable; and the two influential leaders of the New Lights were lugged out of the office and locked up in a cell until all the cases of the day were disposed of. They were then conveyed in a hackney-coach to the House of Correction, where we shall leave them to deplore their unhappy fate and curse the day on which they undertook to bring Ann Jones to a state of grace!

But ere we conclude this chaper we must avail ourselves of the opportunity to declare that, in depicting such characters as Sneaksby and Paxwax, we aim only at exposing the Maw-worms and the hypocritical reprobates who make a trade of religion; and that we have never harboured the slightest intention of ridiculing or maligning the honest, sincere, and conscientious pastors who do their duty to their flock. We are well aware that in the Dissenting Ministry there are thousands of excellent, amiable, and truly pious men; and we therefore delineate Mr. Sneaksby as a type of the *exceptions* to the rule, and not of *the class itself*. We will even declare our positive conviction that for morality, useful learning, and disinterested zeal, the Dissenting Ministers are incomparably superior to the bigotted, narrow-minded, selfish, and dissipated clergy of the Established Church.

CHAPTER CCXV.

AN INTERVIEW IN NEWGATE.

Nearly two months and a half had now elapsed since the Honourable Arthur Eaton was committed to Newgate, to await his trial on the charge of murdering his valet William Dudley.

We must remind our readers that when the investigation of that dark and mysterious tragedy took place at Bow Street, Mr. Eaton addressed the magistrate in the following manner:—"*I can*

only say that I am innocent of this foul deed which is imputed to me. That a tremendous mass of circumstantial evidence has accumulated against me, I readily admit: but there is a key to the reading of this terrible mystery—a clue to the unravelling of this skein of incidents, at present so tangled and so complicated. That is however my secret for the present: useless and unavailing were it to enter upon any explanations at this moment or in this place. No—for a more solemn occasion and a higher tribunal shall be reserved a narrative the details of which will cause every heart to thrill with horror throughout the land, and turn into sympathy and commiseration the loathing and abhorrence which in the meantime may attach themselves unto me." It will be readily understood that Arthur Eaton alluded, in this address, to the bitter persecution which he had experienced at the hands of Fernanda, and every detail of which he purposed to reveal in self-defence at the proper time.

But in those days of which we are writing, the newspapers were of diminutive size, and their reports of cases were necessarily limited and brief. It therefore happened that the whole of Arthur Eaton's address to the magistrate was omitted; and not the slightest reference was made to his declaration that he possessed a key to the reading of the mystery and would give startling explanations when put upon his trial. But the reporters *did* insert the concluding incident of the proceedings at the police-court: namely, that as Arthur Eaton was being led away, the assembled spectators testified their compassion by sundry remarks proving that they looked upon him as a monomaniac swayed by an irresistible instinct for blood.

If such, then, was the impression made upon the minds of the persons who had attended the proceedings and heard the prisoner's address to the magistrate, it cannot be wondered at if the same opinion should be adopted by those who knew nothing more of the matter than what they gleaned from the imperfect reports in the newspapers. In fact, these reports were precisely of a nature to encourage the belief that Arthur Eaton was a monomaniac, and that he had no explanation in reserve nor any defence to offer when the day of trial should come. Such was the general impression upon the public mind: but there were of course a few individuals who thought differently and more profoundly upon the subject. Lord Marchmont, the prisoner's father—for instance—could not possibly imagine that his son was guilty of the crime imputed to him; although the shock occasioned by such a tremendous calamity had thrown the old nobleman on a sick bed and brought him to the very verge of the grave. Then again, there was Pauline Clarendon, who entertained too sublime a confidence not only in the rectitude of her cousin, but likewise in the strength of his mind, to believe for a single moment that he had perpetrated the deed either wilfully or under the influence of a dominant mania. Lord and Lady Holderness had likewise, no doubt, strong opinions upon the same subject: but up to the hour when they encountered Caroline Walters disguised as a midshipman, they had felt convinced that Arthur Eaton must inevitably succumb, on the day of trial, beneath the circumstantial evidence that weighed so tremendously against him.

Nearly two months and a half, we said, had elapsed since the committal of the young gentleman to Newgate. During that period there was one sitting of the criminal tribunal at the Old Bailey: but it followed so closely upon Arthur's consignment to gaol, that his trial was postponed until the ensuing session. In the meantime he recovered somewhat from the dreadful shock which he had experienced on finding that he was regarded as a monomaniac; and during the last two or three weeks of his incarceration, he had long and frequent interviews with his professional adviser. Still, however, was he weighed down by a deep sense of misforture, degradation, and grief: his cheeks had become as pale as they were when he appeared to be perishing beneath the influence of the secret poison—and he felt as if all his vital powers were sapped and undermined beyond all earthly means of restoration.

In such a condition was he,—physically attenuated and morally depressed,—when he was one morning informed by a turnkey that a prisoner who had been committed to Newgate on the previous evening, anxiously and earnestly desired an interview with him. To the questions which Arthur put, the functionary responded that the prisoner alluded to was a certain Caroline Walters—the young woman charged with the murder of Mrs. Lindley, the midwife. With the vividness and celerity of an inspiration did it strike Mr. Eaton that the object of the interview now solicited more or less concerned his own special case:—and yielding at once to the influence of this presentiment, he desired the turnkey to bring the young woman to his cell.

The regulations of the prison were far from being strict or severe in the times of which we are writing; and the liberal fee that Caroline had placed in the turnkey's hands was the incentive to those good offices which he was thus exercising in her behalf. Accordingly, having obtained Arthur Eaton's assent to the demand for an interview, the turnkey hastened to conduct Caroline into the young gentleman's presence.

She was once more habited in the attire which became her sex;—and the moment she entered Eaton's cell, he was struck with the conviction that the mere girl who now stood before him was not likely to be the murderess of the old midwife. But a second and more scrutinising look which he fixed upon her countenance, enabled him to discover an expression of stern resolution in her lineaments; and the thought then arose within him that the strong mind of an experienced woman haply tenanted that form of youthful grace and of winning charms scarcely as yet matured.

The turnkey intimated that he should return again in an hour; and, on leaving the cell, he locked and bolted the door. Arthur rose from his seat—placed a chair for Caroline—and then, resuming his place, anxiously waited for her to explain the purport of her visit.

"Mr. Eaton," she said, in a low but firm and impressive tone, "we have an identity of interests at this moment; and the discovery which I have made that such is the fact, is the only apology I need offer for obtruding myself upon your notice. In a word, *you* are innocent—and *I* am innocent;—

and we must aid and succour each other in proving our guiltlessness—aye, and in bringing the real criminal to justice!"

"The real criminal in which case?" asked the young gentleman, naturally placing himself upon his guard with a stranger.

"In both cases!" was the significant reply.

"Ah! is it possible?" exclaimed Eaton, with a start.

"Do you doubt it?" demanded Caroline, earnestly.

"You mistake the feeling which wrung from me that ejaculation of astonishment," returned Arthur. "The truth is, I had myself entertained a certain suspicion—but only vaguely and distantly, it is true: and now my wonder is excited at observing that you speak confidently of what I had scarcely dared to suspect faintly."

"I understand," said Caroline. "There have been moments when you have fancied it to be just possible that the same hand which inflicted the death-blow upon William Dudley, likewise carried the work of assassination into the home of the midwife? But you have not been able as yet to bring your mind to the settled conviction that such was indeed the fact?"

"You have interpreted my thoughts accurately, Miss Walters," observed the Honourable Mr. Eaton. "But how have you obtained the certainty——"

"That Fernanda is the murderess in both cases?" said Caroline, in ominous tone and with significant manner. "Ah! sir, the evidence against her speaks with a thousand tongues! I know everything connected with yourself and that perfidious creature—Lady Holderness: for I was an inmate of the midwife's house when she became a mother there—yes, and when the offspring of her shame was foully murdered on a night of tempest and of storm!"

"Murdered!" ejaculated Arthur Eaton, every lineament of his pale but handsome countenance suddenly expressing the most acute horror.

"Yes—murdered—foully murdered!" repeated Caroline. "I heard the poor infant's scream, penetrating through the furious noises of the night——"

"Enough! enough!" cried Eaton, starting from his chair. "'Twas my child—the offspring of our love—aye, and of our guilt—but I could have cherished it as fondly as if it were not born in shame! Oh! the foul, foul murderess. Just heaven! I will show her no mercy now! There have been moments when compassion and pity have well nigh prompted me to put a seal upon my lips concerning all that I have to tell, and mount the scaffold, or be consigned as a maniac to Bethlem, so that *she* might be saved. For I have remembered that I seduced her—that I wronged her—and that it was a woman's most righteous and most natural vengeance which she sought to wreak upon me. But now—now, that you assure me she is the murderess of her own child—*my* child——"

"As there is a God above us, sir, I am telling you the truth!" exclaimed Caroline. "Mine was the next room to that which Fernanda occupied at the midwife's;—and I heard enough to afford me a dread insight into the whole appalling tragedy. For the babe, at the very instant of its birth, was flung forth from the window—into the deep and rapid waters of the Thames——"

"Just heaven! did thy thunders sleep that night?" said Eaton, in a tone of mingled solemnity and despair as he sank back upon the seat whence he had risen a few minutes previously. "That Fernanda was cruel—implacable—merciless, I was, alas! too well aware: but that she was a veritable fiend in human shape, I had yet to learn."

"And now, sir, can you not believe that the woman who assented to the murder of her own child," asked Caroline, "is fully capable of putting to death all those who obstruct her path or menace her safety? In a word, is it not probable—is it not certain that the same hand which assassinated William Dudley, inflicted death upon the midwife? Look—listen—and attend carefully! The two crimes were perpetrated on the same night—both enveloped in a deep mystery—and both flinging their ominous shadows upon innocent persons. Of those innocent persons you are one and I am the other."

"Proceed—proceed," said Arthur, in an excited tone: for the murder of the babe was now goading even *his* generous soul to a savage vindictiveness.

"I have already informed you, sir," continued the young woman, "that I was an inmate of Mrs. Lindley's establishment at the same time as Lady Holderness—then Fernanda Aylmer. But I knew not who she was: nor indeed, did I become enlightened on that head until yesterday. However, at the midwife's abode of infamy, I formed the acquaintance of Fernanda; and she spoke darkly and mysteriously to me of the terrible progress of her vengeance—a vengeance that was unsuspected by its object—unknown by its victim! And I also longed for vengeance—for, like her, had I been betrayed by the seducer. She promised to impart her secret to me—the secret of that vengeance which she was inflicting, even from the retreat of shame, upon the author of her dishonour. But she left the house suddenly and abruptly—and I saw her no more until yesterday, when I encountered her, leaning upon the arm of a gentleman, in Cavendish Square. I accosted her — and she spurned me from her,——yes spurned me with her looks—those looks that she can render so fierce and menacing when she chooses! The door of the palatial mansion which she entered, was shut in my face—and at the bottom of my soul did a feeling of bitter rancour spring up at the instant against that arrogant patrician female and her haughty-looking companion. I went into the neighbourhood and instituted certain inquiries. Heavens! what a light suddenly burst upon my mind! That lady, as I heard, was the late Honourable Miss Fernanda Aylmer—now the wife of Lord Holderness. She had formerly been engaged to you, sir,—the match was broken off—no one knew wherefore—and you had for many months pined with a malady that was deemed incurable. But you had suddenly revived—your health came back—and then occurred the mysterious and unaccountable murder of your valet, followed by your consignment to this gaol. These particulars — some gleaned in the course of my inquiries, and others already familiar to my knowledge—turned all my thoughts into a new channel. I had suddenly found a clue to the unravelment of *some* mysteries; while strange suspicions and glimmerings of light were taking birth in my mind relative to *others*. I at

once comprehended that *you*, Mr. Eaton, were the object of that remorseless vengeance of which Fernanda had spoken to me in Fore Street; and it struck me that you had been the victim of a slow poison. But who had administered it? Did not the death of William Dudley afford the key to the solution of that mystery? Yes—'twas your own valet whom the she-wolf had employed to carry out her revenge: and the murder of the man, whom she had made the agent of her iniquity, was calculated to serve a double purpose. It removed from the world an individual who could tell disagreeable truths concerning herself—and it fastened upon you a crime which, the demoness hoped, would send you to the scaffold. All these ideas sprang up in my brain, and assumed the regular order of a continuous chain of events. I saw and comprehended it all—motive and deed, cause and effect, action and aim! But my thoughts, when once pursuing such a channel, were not likely to stop half way; and then was it that *other* suspicions sprang up in my bosom. Mrs. Lindley was murdered on the same night as William Dudley. Why not, then, by the same hand? Yes; for the motive that would prompt the expediency of clearing the she-wolf's pathway of the valet, would suggest the prudence of doing the same by the midwife. Both were the depositories of secrets which they might reveal in the hour of remorse, or let slip in the moment of inadvertency; and the lady's ruin was constantly hanging as it were at the tip of two tongues. Away with them both!—silence them for ever!—and Fernanda is safe! Such was, no doubt, the reasoning of the demoness—that unnatural mother who had assented to the death of her new-born child! You appear impatient, Mr. Eaton; but I shall not detain you much longer with my explanations and commentaries."

"No—I am not impatient at what you are saying, Miss Walters," returned Arthur: "but I am excited—irritated—indignant when I reflect upon the weakness and folly which ever prompted me, even for a moment, to think of saving that woman and sacrificing myself!"

"Ah! well you may repent such intervals of unjustifiable leniency!" exclaimed Caroline. "But I was explaining to you, sir, how the inquiries which I made yesterday afternoon in the vicinage of Cavendish Square, turned all my thoughts into those channels which led me in a few minutes to fix upon Fernanda as the heroine of the two stupendous crimes with which yourself and I are severally charged. A change took place within me. I saw the possibility of rescuing my character from the hideous suspicion that was attached to it—and I felt a sudden yearning to throw off the loathsome reputation of a murderess. The hope of accomplishing this end became all in an instant blended with the previously-existing desire to humble that arrogant patrician lady and that haughty aristocrat who had closed their door in my face. I went back to their mansion—I demanded admission—I was shown into their presence. The conversation which ensued was pregnant with evidence that all my suspicions had flowed into the proper channels and were taking the right direction. The assertions I boldly made—the reminiscences I conjured up—the charges of guilt and turpitude at which I more than hinted, all touched the most excruciating chords in the hearts of that nobleman and his wife. But I need say no more: Fernanda is the murderess of William Dudley and Mrs. Lindley!"

"Yes—it must be so!" murmured Arthur Eaton: "and she will expiate her crimes upon the scaffold! Her husband, too, along with her—the father of those beauteous girls, Octavia and Pauline,—*he* also will be doubtless implicated——"

"And *our* innocence will be made manifest," observed Caroline. "Now, Mr. Eaton, shall we not co-operate in bringing about a result that will lift the weight of infamy from our heads and rescue our names from execration?"

"Assuredly, Miss Walters," was the response, delivered in a firm tone: "for, as you remarked ere now, our interests are at present identical. And to prove to you that I accept your co-operation as frankly and sincerely as it is offered, I will confide to your ears the narrative of the persecution which I have experienced at the hands of Lady Holderness."

The Honourable Arthur Eaton then detailed those particulars which are already known to the reader,—how he had discovered the receipts for the *Heir's Friend* and the *Antidote* at Mrs. Lindley's house—how Bradford, the celebrated chemist of Bond-street, had tested the nature and effects of these prescriptions—how the antidote had checked the wasting malady and brought back health—how Fernanda and Dudley had entered his room at night to consummate the crowning turpitude—how he had suffered the lady to depart—and how the valet, after confessing everything, had become truly repentant.

Caroline Walters listened with the deepest curiosity; and, as the reader may suppose, every word that fell from Arthur's lips confirmed the opinion which she had already formed with regard to Lady Holderness.

The turnkey soon re-appeared to conduct the young woman back to the department of the gaol in which she was lodged: but the promise of another fee elicited from the official a pledge that she should be allowed to re-visit Arthur's cell on the morrow.

CHAPTER CCXVI.

THE FAMILY VAULT.

In one of the most beautiful parts of Warwickshire stands the ancient village of Bellenden. Nothing can be more charmingly picturesque than this little group of habitations, situated on the gentle slope of a hill, and embowered as it were by stately oaks and chesnut-trees which had flourished for ages. The tower of the old church was covered with ivy; and the sacred fane itself was larger than such edifices usually are in country places. The cemetery was crowded with tombstones, some of them so old that the inscriptions were entirely effaced by the hand of Time: indeed, it was universally believed in the village and surrounding district that Bellenden church was one of the most ancient in the whole kingdom.

It was about two o'clock in the afternoon, when a travelling carriage drove up to the door of the Bellenden Arms, which was the name of the village tavern. There were no heraldic blazonries upon the panels of the vehicle: but the plain equipage

was instantaneously recognised, notwithstanding, by the landlord and his wife. Out they came, followed by the hostler and the chambermaid—the men cap in hand and the females all smiles and curtseys—for some years had elapsed since the Marchioness of Bellenden had honoured the village with her presence, and her arrival now was as welcome as it was unexpected!

Yes—it was the Marchioness herself who had just halted at the Bellenden Arms. She was travelling with post-horses and was attended only by a footman and a female domestic, both of whom had been for some years in her service and were of long-tried fidelity.

To the greetings of the landlord and landlady of the Bellenden Arms her ladyship responded in the kindest manner; and alighting from the carriage, she entered the homely parlour to which they escorted her. Having ordered some refreshment, she desired that a message should be sent to the village rector, requesting him to favour her with a call; and as the reverend gentleman lived within a couple of hundred yards of the tavern, he speedily waited upon the Marchioness.

"Mr. Roberts," said her ladyship, when the usual compliments and greetings had been exchanged, "I am desirous to visit the church for a particular purpose. Indeed, I purpose to descend into the vault of the Bellenden family; and I therefore request you to procure the necessary assistance to raise the stone and light me into the receptacle of the dead. You will perhaps also be good enough to accompany me, as I may need a witness with regard to the investigation that I am about to make."

"Your ladyship's commands shall be promptly attended to," said the Rev. Mr. Roberts, by no means startled at the nature of the instructions he had received, inasmuch as he at once comprehended that the object of the Marchioness bore

reference to the law-suit in which she was engaged with the Montgomery family. "Of course your ladyship is aware that the vaults have already been visited and the registers examined by agents sent down from London on the part of Earl Montgomery and Lady Holderness?"

"I am no stranger to the fact which you mention," said the Marchioness. "Indeed, I have seen the affidavits which have been put in by my opponents, and which embody all the evidence obtained by Lord Montgomery's agents when they visited Bellenden Church. But I believe that his lordship himself came down in the first instance—did he not?"

"He did, my lady," answered Mr. Roberts. "It was about three months ago, as nearly as I can guess: but his lordship only remained in the village for a few hours, during which he was making all kinds of inquiries amongst the very oldest inhabitants of the place."

"And those inquiries were relative to the traditions of the Bellenden family?" said the Marchioness, interrogatively.

"Precisely so," returned the clergyman. "Just before his lordship took his departure he called upon me and said——"

"Tell me everything that fell from the Earl's lips on that occasion," exclaimed the Marchioness. "Consult your memory well—and omit not a single word that he uttered. You know not how important it is to my interests that I should sift to the very bottom all the particulars of Lord Montgomery's visit to this place."

"I am indebted to your ladyship for too much kindness not to be anxious to seek every opportunity of showing my gratitude," observed Mr. Roberts: "but even if it were not so, as a matter of justice I should give your ladyship all the information in my power, inasmuch as I consider your ladyship to be the victim of a gross conspiracy to deprive you of your estates. Such is the prevalent feeling in this part of Warwickshire——"

"The *prevalent* feeling—but not the *universal* one, I suppose?" said the Marchioness, inquiringly.

"Well, my lady," responded the clergyman, "I must confess that there are a few individuals in the village and the surrounding parts who espouse the interests of the Montgomerys: but I suppose they have been well paid for their allegiance in this respect—otherwise they would not be so staunch and so bold in asserting their conviction that your ladyship must lose the law-suit."

"Who are the persons you are referring to?" inquired Lady Bellenden: "and what kind of characters do they bear?"

"Characters, indeed!" exclaimed the parson: then, in a more serious tone, he added, "It ill becomes a Christian minister to speak harshly of people behind their backs—or under any circumstances whatsoever: but I cannot conscientiously declare that the individuals to whom I allude are trustworthy, honest, or respectable. In fact, the landlord and the landlady of the Bellenden Arms will corroborate my assertions——"

"But who *are* those individuals?" demanded the Marchioness, impatiently: and as she spoke she drew forth a set of ivory tablets from her reticule.

"In the first place, my lady," responded Mr. Roberts, "there is Chapman the stonemason——"

"And he doubtless was employed by Earl Montgomery's agents to open the vault of the Bellenden family?" said the Marchioness, inquiringly, as she wrote down the man's name in her tablets.

"Precisely so," returned the clergyman. "The sexton Mr. Northwitch, who is likewise a stonemason, was much surprised and vexed that Chapman, who is altogether unconnected with the church, should have had the job. However, such were the Earl's instructions to his agents; and as the vault was opened and examined under an order of the Court of Chancery, upon an affidavit put in by the Earl, there was no use in Northwitch's making any objection. Chapman accordingly did it for the Earl's agents."

"And now continue your list of the suspicious characters who speak against me and are wedded to the interests of the Montgomerys," said the Marchioness.

"I have mentioned Chapman," resumed Mr. Roberts: "and the next in the catalogue are the Austins—an old couple who live in a cottage about two miles off, on the road to Malden Farm. They are nasty people, I can assure your ladyship; and although they apparently live very retired and seem to keep themselves quiet, yet they are known to be anything but saints. The man Austin has a sister—a widow—who lives in a cottage near Congleton, and of whom report likewise speaks disparagingly. Her name is Bushman. She is a very old woman, but of astonishing activity and bustling habits——"

"But Congleton is fifty miles away," interrupted the Marchioness. "How, then, can this Widow Bushman's character and attributes be so well known in the village of Bellenden?"

"Because she was a resident here, my lady, until within the last year or eighteen months," answered Mr. Roberts; "and she was one of the most staunch of Earl Montgomery's partizans."

"Any other names to particularise?" asked the noble lady.

"None," was the reply. "Chapman, the Austins, and Widow Bushman are the principal. But, by the way, I recollect that I have not informed your ladyship of what Lord Montgomery said to me upon the occasion of his visit to this place three months ago."

"Speak slowly, Mr. Roberts," observed the Marchioness; "as I shall write it all down. Now—proceed."

"His lordship called upon me at the rectory just before he left the village," continued the clergyman,—"and, after the usual interchange of compliments, he said, '*Mr. Roberts, I have gleaned some very curious particulars concerning the deceased members of the Bellenden family, and which particulars are most important to my interests in the suit that I am carrying on against the Marchioness.*'—I thereupon begged his lordship not to make me his confidant, as I was bound by gratitude to support the cause and defend the interests of the noble lady who gave me the presentation of the Bellenden rectory.—'*I am aware of your devotion in that quarter, Mr. Roberts,*' said Earl Montgomery; '*and so far from being angry with you, I honour you for it. Indeed I have called upon you from motives of respect and courtesy, and to inform you that in consequence of*

the curious particulars I have this day gleaned from some of the patriarchs of the village, I shall cause the vault of the Bellenden family to be examined and the register of deaths to be searched.'—Upon hearing these announcements, I respectfully but firmly explained to his lordship that he was welcome to consult the registers, but that he could not be permitted to break open the family vault of the house of Bellenden, without a proper authority or permission.—'*Well, you are quite right to act cautiously, Mr. Roberts,*' exclaimed the Earl, with an off-hand manner and indifferent tone. '*I will apply to the Lord Chancellor for an order to open the vault; and I will send down agents duly authorised to carry this aim into effect. The examination of the registers can stand over until the same opportunity. Indeed, it will be better that the same persons should conduct both investigations, because there will then be only one set of witnesses, and consequently a saving of expense. I presume, Mr. Roberts, that when I do thus send my agents down, you will throw no obstacle in their way.*'—I answered that I should obey any official mandate or proper authority in respect to the opening of the vault; and that as for the registers, any one was at liberty to inspect them on certain terms.—'*The truth is,*' continued the Earl, who seemed resolved to be communicative, although I can assure your ladyship there was nothing encouraging in my manner towards him, '*a great deal—indeed, almost everything on the Marchioness of Bellenden's side—depends upon a particular conveyance deed which she has put into Court. This deed is alleged to have been signed by the late Marquis of Bellenden's father fifty years ago—that is to say, in the year* 1745. *But according to what I have been able to glean from one old man of eighty-four, another of seventy-three, and a third of sixty-nine, the particular Marquis of Bellenden alluded to died and was buried at least two years before* 1745; *and my informants are enabled to speak thus positively as to dates, because that of* 1745 *was the year of the Great Rebellion. If, therefore, it should transpire that the late Marquis's father did really die in* 1743, *and not in* 1745, *then the conveyance deed which Lady Bellenden has filed in Court must be a forgery, because it purports to have been dated and signed in* 1745.'"

"Lord Montgomery was very kind and condescending to narrate all these particulars," observed the Marchioness of Bellenden, who had committed to her tablets every sentence and syllable uttered by the clergyman. "Did he tell you anything more, Mr. Roberts?"

"His lordship merely said that if he had appeared strangely communicative, it was only because he was conducting the law-suit in an open, frank, and candid manner, and he did not care if all the world knew each successive step that was taken in it, so far as he was concerned. And now," added the Rev. Mr. Roberts, "that I have told your ladyship all that passed between the Earl and myself on the occasion referred to, I will hasten to make the necessary preparations for your visit to the church."

With these words the reverend gentleman took a temporary leave of the Marchioness, who now remained alone in the parlour at the inn. For a few minutes she reflected profoundly upon all that she had just heard: then, as a smile of triumph appeared slowly upon her beautiful countenance, she murmured to herself, "The victory shall be mine—and Eugene Montgomery shall sink humbled, terror-stricken, and a miserable suppliant at my feet."

Having thus expressed the feeling that was uppermost in her mind,—a feeling which certainly savoured more of vindictiveness than was quite consistent with her character for Christian benevolence and pious resignation,—the Marchioness of Bellenden rang the bell for her confidential domestics.

Of these two individuals we must say a few words. The female attendant was a woman of about fifty years of age—still retaining the traces of great beauty, and wearing a matronly appearance of the highest respectability. In fact, her looks, her style of dress, her manner, and her speech, all seemed to denote a sedateness without hypocrisy, and a deep sense of religious feeling without fanaticism.

The footman was a tall, handsome man, with a dark complexion and a serious look. He was about forty years of age: his figure was finely modelled, the stalwart proportions being blended with masculine grace;—and his demeanour was altogether superior to his situation. He seemed older than he really was on account of the air of extreme steadiness which characterised him, and which was the dominant impression that his appearance made upon the mind of any one who saw him for the first time,—so that it was necessary to look as it were beneath that aspect of sedateness to discover that he was in reality a very handsome man.

In a word, judging from their external appearances, the female attendant and the footman were two domestics of the most respectable class, and precisely such as a widow-lady of excellent reputation might be expected to have in her suite.

We said that the Marchioness of Bellenden, soon after Mr. Roberts had quitted her, summoned those two dependants to her presence;—and perhaps the reader will expect to be informed that on entering the room they still retained all the cold reserve of manner and ceremonial rigidity of countenance which invested them with so decorous an air of sedateness. No such thing! The instant the door closed behind them, their appearance changed as if by magic; the matronly demeanour which was so imposing on the part of the female, and the serious look which gave such an air of respectability to the man, were thrown off all in a moment, and with an evident feeling of relief at passing from a condition of studied restraint to the relaxation and abandonment of temporary freedom.

"What news, my dear?" demanded the female, with a mingled curiosity and friendly interest in her voice and manner: and she took a chair without waiting for either invitation or permission to be seated.

"Yes—what news, Laura?" inquired the footman, flinging himself upon the sofa, stretching out his legs, and passing his fingers through his wavy and perfumed hair. "Has Parson Roberts been able to give you any particulars in addition to what you already knew?"

"Many—and all most important, my dear Richard," replied the Marchioness, who was evidently accustomed to this familiarity with her two confidential domestics. "In a word, I have found

out the places where Montgomery and his hired ruffians halted on two occasions—and you must start off presently and take the necessary steps to make these discoveries available and useful in case of need. One place is a cottage two miles from hence, on the road to Malden Farm: it is kept by an old couple named Austin. The other place is also a cottage, but about fifty miles distant—in fact, close by Congleton: the woman who keeps it, is called Widow Bushman—and she is related to the Austins."

"And what about the man who opened the vault for Montgomery's agents?" said the footman inquiringly.

"Ah! what about him?" echoed the female dependant.

"Now, do not be impatient Richard—nor you either, Margaret," said Lady Bellenden, in a tone of good-humoured chiding: "and you shall both know everything in time. The stone-mason's name is Chapman—and he lives in the village. I shall get you, Margaret, to see him while I visit the church; and you must not be sparing of gold in order to win him over to my interests. The evidence he can give would no doubt be important."

"Depend upon it, my love," said Margaret, in a tone of earnest assurance, "nothing shall be wanting on my part to forward your interests."

"And I know you will believe me, Laura, when I say the same thing," observed Richard. "But when do you wish me to visit these Austins who dwell in the neighbourhood, and that Widow Bushman who resides near Congleton?"

"I wish you to start off at once, Richard," replied the Marchioness. "You can doubtless procure a vehicle of some sort——"

"Give yourself no concern on that head, my dear Laura," said the footman: "I shall find some means of conveyance. Tell me where and when I am to rejoin you—and I shall be off."

"You will either find me or hear of me at Malden Farm," returned the lady. "If I quit that place before you reach it, I will leave a letter for you. Have you plenty of money in your purse?"

"Plenty," answered Richard. "And now good bye for the present."

Thus speaking, the footman rose from the sofa and embraced the Marchioness of Bellenden. In a moment her eyes, usually of so soft and melting an expression, became illumined with a burning lustre: as if through those windows of the soul shone forth the sudden kindling of all the fires of her impassioned nature. Throwing her arms round the neck of that man who thus freely bestowed his caresses upon her, the titled lady glued her lips to his swarthy but handsome countenance;—and by the lighting up of her fine blue eyes, the deep flushing of her plump cheeks, and the quick heaving and falling of her luxuriant bosom, it was evident that the slightest contact with her good-looking dependant served as a spark to the train of her desires and made them flame up as it were into a frenzy.

"Hush! a footstep approaches!" exclaimed Margaret: and rising from her chair, she suddenly resumed her artificial demeanour of matronly sedateness as easily as if it were a cloak that she was putting on without an effort.

At the same instant, too, the handsome footman, starting from the embrace of his noble mistress, drew himself up to his full height and stood in her presence with a look and an attitude that denoted the profoundest respect. The Marchioness rapidly smoothed her hair, arranged her cap, and composed her looks in such a manner that the keenest observer could not have noticed the slightest indication to lead him to suspect that her features had so recently been ruffled by sensuous desires. Every trace of that voluptuous expression had passed away from her countenance, which all in a moment became as placid and as calmly beautiful as if the burning kiss of lust had never been imprinted on its damask surface!

Thus, when the Rev. Mr. Roberts re-entered the room, on his return from the church, he found the two dependants standing before their mistress with the proper air of respectful attention—while the lady herself was issuing her orders in a tone where mildness and conscious authority were so nicely blended as to denote alike the kind mistress and the well-bred woman.

"You will therefore start off at once, Richard," said the Marchioness; "and you must be particularly careful in executing the commissions which I have entrusted to you."

"Your ladyship may rest assured on that head," returned the footman: then, with a low bow—while not a muscle of his countenance relaxed from the serious expression which it had assumed—he took his departure.

"And you, Margaret," resumed Lady Bellenden, "will have the goodness to step out into the village and make these inquiries which I have been dictating to you."

"Your ladyship's commands shall be faithfully attended to," was the response: and Margaret likewise quitted the room.

"Everything is now ready at the church for your ladyship's reception," said the Rev. Mr. Roberts.

"I thank you," observed the Marchioness: then hastily putting on her bonnet and throwing her scarf over her shoulders, she accepted the arm of the clergyman who proposed to escort her to the sacred edifice.

As she passed through the village, all the inhabitants appeared at their doors to greet her with bows and curtseys; and these salutations were acknowledged with the sweetest affability on her part. In a few minutes the churchyard was reached; and beneath the porch of the ancient building the sexton and his assistant were waiting her ladyship's arrival. In accordance with the instructions they received through Mr. Roberts, they were provided with implements to raise the stones and lanterns to light the vaults.

The sun was shining through the windows, the countless diamond panes of which gave a prismatic effect to the warm lustre: and it seemed as if slanting lines, or rather oblique columns, of impalpable dust stretched from those windows half across the nave of the church. Leaning upon the clergyman's arm, and followed by Northwitch and his assistant, the Marchioness of Bellenden threaded the aisle, until the party came to a cloistral recess which was screened off by a partition of stone-work elaborately sculptured. Within the enclosure the walls were covered with monumental tablets, all sacred to the memories of the departed scions of the noble house of Bellenden: and the huge flagstones of the pavement were likewise covered with inscriptions.

"There is one particular stone which must be raised, I believe," said the Marchioness, as her eyes wandered slowly over the pavement,—"inasmuch as it covers the steps leading down into the vault."

"This is the stone, my lady," returned Northwitch, pointing with a crowbar to a particular flag.

"Then raise it," said the Marchioness. "Will the task be a long one? Because, if so, I may as well search in the meantime for a particular entry in the register of deaths."

"We shall not be long moving the stone, my lady," replied Northwitch: "because it was lifted a short time back, and is therefore comparatively loose in its setting. I mean that the cement is not properly dry yet; and I dare say that Chapman who raised the stone for the Earl's agents, did not trouble himself to put it down again with overmuch care. However, here goes!"

To work accordingly went the sexton and his assistant; and Lady Bellenden decided upon remaining to visit the place of tombs first, before she repaired to the vestry to examine the register.

In about twenty minutes the enormous stone was raised and rolled back from the mouth of the subterranean which it covered. The sexton and his man then lighted their lanterns; and having allowed a few minutes for the escape of the foul air from the place, they descended the narrow flight of stone steps which led down into the family vault of the ancient race of Bellenden. The Marchioness followed—and the clergyman closed the rear.

The subterranean has *already* been described, in a former chapter, as spacious;—*and round the walls were arranged numerous coffins, in three rows—the lowest standing upon the paved floor, and the other two resting on stout iron supporters projecting from the solid masonry. By these means no coffin actually stood upon another; and between the rows there was space sufficient to enable the plates upon the lids to be examined without moving the coffins themselves.*

The party reached the bottom of the steps and were advancing farther into the vault, when a sudden ejaculation of horror burst from the lips of the sexton who was leading the way.

"What is the matter?" demanded Lady Bellenden, for the moment stricken by a superstitious terror.

"There—yonder—that coffin!" cried Northwitch, pointing in a particular direction with one hand and holding the lantern high up with the other.

"Ah! I see," ejaculated his assistant, drawing back a pace or two with a visible shuddering of his entire form.

At the same instant the Marchioness and Mr. Roberts caught sight of the object which had produced such a sensation upon the sexton and his man;—and exclamations of mingled horror and disgust broke from the noble lady and the reverend gentleman. For, behold! on the uppermost row, at the farthest extremity of the vault, a coffin had first open—and a putrid corpse was exposed to view.

"How shocking!" exclaimed the Marchioness of Bellenden, a raw, damp, and mouldy smell now offending her nostrils, and a thick clammy taste clinging to her palate. "But whose corpse can it be, that it is comparatively so well preserved?"

"Why, my lady," cried Northwitch, "that body may have been here twenty, thirty, or even forty years, and yet be no more than half-decomposed as it is now. It is the embalming and the leaden coffins that preserve them. This particular coffin has however burst, as your ladyship perceives: shell and all, it is laid completely open. But I'll soon see whose corpse it is."

With these words, the sexton approached the coffin and held the lantern in such a manner that its rays might fall upon the piece of the broken lid where the plate still remained. As a matter of course the light streamed upon the dead body, from which a considerable portion of the winding-sheet had fallen away; and not only was its countenance exposed, but the neck, chest, and right side were all laid bare.

"I should think that this body must have been placed here at least twenty years ago," observed the sexton, as he thus took a near view of the loathsome spectacle. "It is even more swollen and discoloured than it is decomposed, now that I examine it close. In fact, it must have been splendidly embalmed—for the features are well nigh perfect—and the hands are entire. Ah! here's actually the mark of a ring upon one of the fingers! Why, the ring that made the mark must have been on the hand until lately: it has evidently been plucked off within a recent period. There's the scraping, as one may call it, which the ring made along the rotting finger as it was drawn away. But, heavens! how curiously the corpse is discoloured! I've seen a vast many bodies in my time—and some few that have been embalmed: but I never saw one that, not being more decomposed than this, was so shockingly discoloured. Besides—not only unnaturally discoloured—but also swollen—dreadfully swollen! Ah! it looks uncommonly as if the deceased, whoever he was, had died by poison!"

"Well, whose corpse is it?" demanded the assistant, somewhat impatiently. "Can't you make the plate out? or is the inscription rusted away?"

"No—it is tolerably plain," returned the sexton. "Let me see? The date is 1775——why, it's the last Marquis of Bellenden, to be sure,—her ladyship's husband!" exclaimed Northwitch.

"Cover up the remains with something!" cried the Rev. Mr. Roberts. "Here—stay——I will run and fetch a piece of the church mourning from the vestry——"

"No—do not trouble yourself," said the Marchioness, as she clung to his arm: and the voice in which she spoke was low and hollow.

"Ah! your ladyship is unwell?" exclaimed Mr. Roberts; and turning his eyes upon the Marchioness, he was startled and shocked at the ghastly expression which her countenance wore. "Shall I conduct you hence?—let me lead you away? The sickly odour—the dreadful spectacle—and the sexton's words—all are enough to overpower your ladyship——"

"No, no—I will remain—I feel better now," murmured the Marchioness: then, with an almost superhuman effort to crush the feelings that were struggling in her bosom, she turned towards the sexton, saying, "Mr. Northwitch, I should recommend you to be more cautious and guarded for the future in the free and off-hand way in which you toss as it were from the tip of your tongue the first words that come uppermost. You should weigh

your thoughts before you so glibly give utterance to them. For by proclaiming in so random a manner the very first and of course most inconsiderate impressions which any particular occurrence or spectacle may make upon your mind, you may be unintentionally the cause of exciting the most disagreeable suspicions."

"I humbly beg your ladyship's pardon," said the man, who did not immediately perceive the drift of the noble lady's observations, and therefore was for a few moments at a loss to comprehend how he had done wrong: "but I am sure I did not mean to give offence when I talked of the discoloured state of his lordship's body. And as for my saying that it seemed as if his lordship the late Marquis had been poisoned, the notion is absurd. But I made the remark before I knew whose coffin it was——"

"Enough upon the subject, Mr. Northwitch," said the Marchioness, in a voice which she now rendered mournful though firm. "You have wounded my feelings deeply: but I pardon you—yes, cheerfully pardon you. I know you spoke inconsiderately——"

"I did, upon my soul, my lady," exclaimed the sexton, quite concerned to think how much mischief his unguarded words had occasioned. "We all know that you are a kind-hearted and excellent lady—and I would sooner cut my tongue out than allow it to hurt your ladyship's feelings."

"I believe you, Northwitch," said the Marchioness, in a tone of compassion and forgiveness. "But you must learn, my good friend, that the remains of the dead often present the most remarkable appearances——do they not, Mr. Roberts?"

"Assuredly, my lady," responded the clergyman, who, although a well meaning and harmless kind of an individual, nevertheless carried his obsequiousness to the extreme of a fulsome sycophancy, and was therefore ready to corroborate everything that his aristocratic patroness might say.

"The swollen and discoloured appearance of the corpse of my long-dead husband," continued the Marchioness, in a tone profoundly mournful, "is only one of the sad phases of decomposition——is it not so, Mr. Roberts?"

"Beyond all matter of doubt, my lady," was the reply.

"And most sad and distressing is it for me, to have been doomed this day to gaze upon the remains of one whom I respected so profoundly on earth," continued the Marchioness, "but who for long years past has been a saint in heaven! Ah! Mr. Roberts, I am no hypocrite—I am incapable of affecting a feeling that is not intrinsically real. I therefore admit, with frankness and with candour, that I did not love the old and venerable nobleman who made me his wife—gave me his name—and bequeathed to me that fortune which dishonest pretenders would now wrest from my grasp: no—I did not *love* him in the true sense of the term—but I respected him—I revered him—I esteemed him as a man who sought to ensure my happiness to the utmost of his power——"

"I am glad your ladyship has said this much," exclaimed Northwitch, with an honest exultation, although the interruption was somewhat of the rudest: "for that scandalous fellow Chapman declares that your ladyship hated and detested the late Marquis—and that your ladyship loved another, saving your ladyship's presence——"

"Northwitch, have done—be quiet—silence!" exclaimed the Rev. Mr. Roberts, perfectly horrified at the sexton's indiscretion, although it plainly arose from the man's zealous devotion to the cause of the Marchioness in opposition to that of the Montgomerys.

"The venom of scandalous tongues produces no disagreeable effects upon me," observed the Marchioness, in a tone of bland resignation: "and whatever rumours my worthy friend Mr. Northwitch has heard, need not distress him on my account. But assuredly this is not the most pleasant place in the world to choose for our conversation," cried her ladyship, in a different voice: "and I feel the damp of the vault striking chill and cold to my very bones. Let us, then, proceed to search for the object which has brought me hither. Mr. Northwitch, you will oblige me by finding the coffin of the late Marquis's father. The plate should bear the obituary date of 1745—but if you happen to find one of 1743——"

"Here is the coffin, my lady, of which you speak," exclaimed the sexton, pausing in the midst of the scrutiny which he had commenced with regard to the tenements of the dead. "But the date is 1743——"

"That will do," said the Marchioness. "Now, wrench off the plate—or rather remove it gently if you can—and be careful to keep the four screws:"—then, turning towards the clergyman, she observed, "Mr. Roberts, as my witness in this proceeding, you will maintain your eyes fixed upon that plate and those screws, in order to be enabled to identify them on any future occasion.'

"I will do so, my lady," answered the minister.

The plate was wrenched off, and, together with the screws, was given into the keeping of the reverend gentleman. The Marchioness of Bellenden then quitted the vault, having liberally remunerated the sexton and his assistant, and having charged them to get the coffin of her deceased husband properly repaired before they finally sealed the mouth of the family vault again.

"Accompanied by Mr. Roberts, the Marchioness now proceeded to the vestry of the church; and on reaching that room, she said, "In the first place, reverend sir, you must envelop that coffin-plate and the screws in a sheet of paper and affix your seal to the packet, so that you may be enabled at the proper time to prove the identity of those objects."

The noble lady's instructions were immediately obeyed: and she then desired the clergyman to produce the parochial Register of Burials. Opening a small closet, or cabinet, which joined the vestry-room, Mr. Roberts took the bulky volume from the iron safe where it was kept; and the Marchioness proceeded to examine it with the most careful scrutiny. At length she discovered the particular entry which she sought and of which she bade Mr. Roberts take special notice.

A few minutes afterwards Lady Bellenden quitted the church; and, returning to the inn, she entered her carriage and took her departure from the village, accompanied by the faithful Margaret.

CHAPTER CCXVII.

MALDEN FARM.

It was now about five o'clock in the evening, and the breeze, laden with the perfumes of May, came with a delightful freshness after the sultry heat which had previously prevailed.

Having ascended a hill, the sides and summit of which were embowered with the richest emerald foliage, the travelling-carriage proceeded at a more rapid rate along the narrow bye-road which it was pursuing; and at a distance of about two miles from the village, a small but neat-looking cottage, standing in a lonely spot, was passed by.

"That is the abode of the Austins," said the Marchioness of Bellenden to Margaret, who was seated inside the carriage along with her noble mistress. "I wonder how Richard has succeeded with them."

"Better, I hope, than I did with old Chapman," responded Margaret. "But perhaps Richard is still there," she added, looking forth from the window of the vehicle. "And yet I do not see the chaise which he hired from the landlord of the Bellenden Arms; and there is no stable or out-house where it could be put up."

"We may therefore conclude that he has seen the Austins and gone on post-haste towards Congleton," said the Marchioness. "But, alluding to Chapman, you need not feel vexed, my dear Margaret, that you were unable to succeed in that quarter: we have plenty of evidence, heaven knows, without him. And yet," she added in a mournful voice, "I shall derive but comparatively little pleasure from the fact of securing to myself the safe and undisputed possession of these estates, since he whom I love so madly—so passionately—so fervidly, can never be mine! No, it were useless to make another attempt to bring him within the circle of my influence——"

"Let us not despair on that head, my dear Laura," interrupted Margaret.

Lady Bellenden made no response: but, heaving a low and long sigh, she fell into a profound reverie.

In about an hour from the moment of quitting the village, the travelling-carriage emerged from the bye-lane which it had been pursuing, and entered a broader road.

"There!" suddenly ejaculated the Marchioness, as she pointed from the window towards a bridge which was in the course of being erected over a clear stream about ninety or a hundred feet wide.

"Yes—that is the spot!" cried Margaret, a visible shudder agitating her whole frame. "Ten or a dozen years have elapsed since I was last in this neighbourhood—and great improvements have been made. This wide road—that bridge——"

"Ah! that bridge," added the noble lady: and she exchanged significant looks with her faithful dependant.

The carriage was now leaving the bridge behind and advancing along the road towards a small farm-house about a quarter of a mile distant, and the white walls of which gleamed forth from the midst of the foliage that enhanced the picturesque beauty of the landscape.

"Behold Malden Farm," said the Marchioness. "There are the same heavy overhanging gables—the same small and deep-set windows, with their diamond-fashioned panes—the same portico with the creeping clematis, which I remember years and years ago when first I visited the Bellenden estates."

"And there, too," added Margaret, looking towards a splendid mansion which stood upon an eminence about a couple of miles beyond the farm,—"there too, is Bellenden Hall, the finest country-seat in Warwickshire. The whole domain which the view can now embrace, belongs to thee, dear Laura;—and, thank heaven! the hated Montgomerys shall not wrest it from thy grasp. But are you decided upon stopping at Malden Farm instead of going on to the Hall?"

"Yes—such is my intention, Margaret," responded the noble lady. "You know that I have not long to remain in Warwickshire—that this law-suit compels my immediate return to London—and that it therefore becomes a matter of consequence to save every mile of road and minute of time. The Farm is two miles nearer than the Hall to the new bridge, at which point, you know," she added significantly, "we have such important business to transact: and moreover, by staying at the Farm, we at once obtain the opportunity of making inquiries concerning Lord Raymond Montgomery——"

"For what earthly purpose, Laura?" demanded Margaret. "Since you are confident that you have not been misled respecting that young nobleman's fate, wherefore ask any questions regarding him?"

"To prevent *others* from suspecting that we are already so well informed on that head," returned the Marchioness.

"Then you mean that the discovery which is to be made either to-night or to-morrow morning, shall have the appearance of hazard and accident?" continued the dependant, interrogatively

"Precisely so," answered the noble lady. "Indeed, I do not purpose to proclaim to the world all I know or all I may yet glean relative to my opponents, unless they force me to extremes."

"I understand—and I approve of the course which you intend to adopt," said Margaret.

At this moment the carriage entered an avenue of evergreens, the great gate leading into which was held open by a stout, sun-burnt, middle-aged man whose countenance was the picture of good-humour and vigorous health. This was Farmer Brooks, the occupant of Malden, and therefore one of the numerous tenantry of the Marchioness, inasmuch as she held possession of the estates during the progress of the Chancery suit. He had observed the carriage approaching; and having ordered his wife, who was a comely woman of four-and-forty, "to see that all was comfortable and tidy in-doors," he had run down to the end of the avenue to open the gate.

Mrs. Brooks was one of those simple-minded and well-meaning bodies—one of those ingenuous and honest creatures, that are rarely (at least at her age) to be met amidst the contamination of cities and great towns, but which are often found in the small farm-houses or secluded cottages of agricultural districts. The receipt of a letter in the morning to the effect that the Marchioness of Bellenden would visit Malden Farm in the evening, and perhaps pass the night there, had put the worthy woman quite

upon the *qui vive;* and during the whole day she had been making preparations to receive the illustrious guest. In this task she had been duly assisted by her son and daughter—the former a young man of two or three-and-twenty, and the latter a girl of eighteen or nineteen. The comely matron and her two good-looking, sun-burnt, healthy auxiliaries presented a picture of domestic cordiality and love such as the eye does not often contemplate beneath the roof of rich men's dwellings.

Sincere and honest was the welcome which the Marchioness therefore experienced at Malden Farm; and finding that so much pains had been bestowed upon the repast which was just ready to be served up, she did not choose to give any offence or wound sensitive feelings by not partaking of it at once. She accordingly resolved to postpone until the morning her walk to the bridge which was being constructed;—and having laid aside her bonnet and scarf, she sate down to table, in company with the farmer's family and Margaret, all of whom she insisted on making her companions for the time, and not her servitors.

"I am sure, my lady," said Farmer Brooks, during a pause in the progress of the festivities, "I am more honoured and much happier than I can well express in words, on account of this visit which your ladyship has condescended to pay my humble abode. I know that your ladyship's steward and housekeeper up at the Hall will be much annoyed that your ladyship did not put up at your own house instead of stopping at mine—I mean, that your ladyship did not proceed direct to your own seat instead of tarrying at Malden Farm, which certainly is your own likewise though tenanted by me. And I can add with truth and sincerity that although young Lord Raymond did lodge at our house for a considerable time, and not only behave munificiently but also in a most friendly manner towards us,—yet I unfeignedly hope that your ladyship will beat the Montgomerys and the Aylmers in the long run and continue our mistress and our landlady."

"I am sure we should never get a better," exclaimed Mrs. Brooks, in a tone of unaffected fervour. "But I hope your ladyship was not offended with us for letting Lord Raymond come to lodge at the Farm——"

"If I had been offended, my good woman," interrupted the Marchioness, "should I have visited you this evening, thereby preferring for the time your dwelling to my own country-seat which is so near at hand? Besides, when Lord Raymond first applied to you for permission to establish himself as a lodger in the peaceful seclusion of Malden Farm, you wrote to me frankly and ingenuously upon the subject."

"And your ladyship replied that you had no personal animosity against your cousin Lord Raymond Montgomery," observed Farmer Brooks, "and that you therefore entertained not the slightest objection to his becoming a lodger beneath this roof."

"I think that I said even something more than this," remarked Lady Bellenden: "for if my memory serves me truly, I stated in my reply to your letter, Mr. Brooks, that I entertained the deepest sympathy and compassion for my cousin Raymond, to whom however I have not spoken for so many years. But I had heard of his hopeless passion for the beautiful Fernanda Aylmer, now Lady Holderness,—I had heard of the enthusiastic devotion with which he worshipped that splendid creature,—I had heard of the heartless coquetry which she practised towards him, giving him encouragement at one time, and then jilting him for the Honourable Mr. Elton, whom she did not marry after all,—I had heard these various particulars, I say, and I was touched with pity for the young noble. Indeed, I expressed myself in those terms when writing the reply to your letter."

"I remember it well, my lady," said Brooks; "and the kind, the handsome, the friendly tone of your letter decided me and my wife in receiving Lord Raymond into our house, agreeably to his request."

"I suppose that being well nigh heart-broken by his disappointed love," observed the Marchioness, "he courted solitude as the only condition of existence which could possibly accord with a mind so wounded and a spirit so bruised as his own. Poor youth! I had heard much of his amiability—his goodness of heart—his generosity towards the poor;—and I pitied him—sincerely pitied him. And to tell you the truth, it was partially with the desire of meeting my unfortunate cousin, whom I have not seen since his childhood, that I resolved to tarry at your abode, good people, during my few hours' visit to this neighbourhood. Is Raymond at home?" she inquired, lowering her voice as if she fancied that the young nobleman himself might possibly overhear the question which she had just put.

"At home!—here! my lady?" cried Farmer Brooks, astonished at the question. "But I recollect," he added, in a calmer tone as he recovered from his amazement: "you may not have heard of what has happened——"

"Has anything disagreeable occurred?" demanded Lady Bellenden, with all the appearance of intense surprise and painful curiosity.

"Three months have elapsed, my lady," responded the farmer, in a solemn tone, "since Lord Raymond fled from Malden—yes—left us with a cruel abruptness that savoured even of ingratitude after all the attention we showed him and the endeavours we made to comfort and cheer him."

"Lord Raymond left you thus?" cried the Marchioness. "How extraordinary that he should have acted in such a manner!"

"Perhaps, my lady," suggested Margaret, in a deferential tone, "the poor young nobleman is scarcely responsible for his actions—and he may have obeyed some sudden impulse——"

"That is what I and my wife have said to each other a thousand times since his lordship's disappearance," exclaimed Farmer Brooks. "Besides, he was often subjected to wild freaks of fancy and strange humours, which were wont to yield to fits of the deepest despondency. More than once has he said to me, '*My good friend, if I should suddenly take it into my head to leave your abode and set out on a pedestrian tour through the North of England, do not be surprised. I sometimes feel as if nothing but violent exercise and a continuous change of scene will save me from going mad.*'—And yet, although we were thus warned by Lord Raymond, we were alarmed and vexed when he disappeared so suddenly: but finding that letters soon afterwards arrived here addressed to him as usual, we felt reassured by the belief that his friends and relatives knew that he was safe——"

"Besides, what could possibly have happened to him?" exclaimed the Marchioness of Bellenden. "If he had been foully dealt with, traces of the crime would have remained; and if he had committed suicide in a moment of intolerable anguish or blank despair, his corpse would have been discovered. Depend upon it, good people, the poor young gentleman is wandering like a troubled spirit about the country ——"

"And what inclines us to that belief, my lady, is that he took away with him all his money and all his private papers on the morning when he left us," said Farmer Brooks. "His bed had been slept in during the previous night—and the inference is that he had risen early——that is to say, early for the time of year; for it was in the winter season—just at the end of February——"

"It was the 26th, father," observed young Brooks.

"You are particular as to the date, my boy," said his parent.

"I remember it so well, father," returned the lad, "because it was on the same Monday morning that the great crowning-stone fell upon the buttress of the new bridge."

"Ah! what—an accident?" inquired the Marchioness.

"No, my lady—that is to say, not an accident by which anybody was hurt," responded young Brooks. "But when I and my mates went down to begin work soon after day-break——"

"My son, your ladyship should know, is a stonemason," interrupted the elder Brooks, by way of explanation; "and he has been engaged from the first upon the new bridge which your ladyship ordered to be built across the river. When one of the buttresses was completed about three months ago, it was determined that your ladyship's steward should be invited by all the tenants in this district to superintend the deposit of an earthen jar full of coins in the great hollow of the buttress. The crowning-stone was em-

pended over the mouth with such precision and in such a manner that on loosening the winch-rope which sustained it, the massive granite could not fail to settle exactly on the head of the buttress."

"Such was the condition in which we had left the stone on the Saturday night," observed young Brooks; "and when we went to work on the Monday morning, lo and behold! the winch-rope had given way and the crowning-stone had fallen upon the buttress. But as it had settled to a hair's-breadth in the position which it was intended to occupy, your ladyship's steward decided upon not having it disturbed for the mere sake of placing the coins inside the buttress."

"And therefore the ceremony did not take place?" exclaimed the Marchioness, inquiringly.

"No, my lady," responded young Brooks. "Your ladyship's steward gave orders that the ceremony should be postponed until the next buttress is built——"

"But this is absurd!" cried the Marchioness, in a tone of apparent annoyance and dissatisfaction: "my orders were explicit upon the subject—and they have not been obeyed. I wrote to my steward commanding him to have the usual ceremony performed at the proper time—and I sent him a quantity of old coins which he was to use, in addition to the various specimens of the existing currency, for the purpose. Now there is a sort of superstition in the minds of many honest but simple country-folks, relative to the baptizing of the foundation-stones of a new bridge with a bottle of wine, and the deposit of the coins in the first buttress;—and I would not for the world have such a prejudice shocked——"

"I am glad your ladyship has mentioned this matter," observed Mrs. Brooks, "for I can assure your ladyship that many of your ladyship's tenants declare they will never cross that bridge—for, let it be built ever so strong, they think it won't be safe on account of omitting the usual ceremonies when the first buttress was raised."

"Then we will have the affair righted to-morrow, my good woman," said the Marchioness, in a tone of firm decision. "Let your son step up to the Hall and tell my steward that I have arrived at Malden Farm, where I propose to pass the night—and that early in the morning I will myself superintend the ceremonials relative to the bridge. Immediate preparations must therefore be made for the purpose—especially as the huge stone over the first buttress must be raised again——"

"I will go at once, my lady," said young Brooks, rising from his seat, "and deliver your message at the Hall. I will then go and inform the overseer of the works that the masons must be at the bridge by daylight. Shall I tell the steward that he is to wait upon your ladyship this evening?"

"No—I will see him in the morning upon matters of business," returned the Marchioness: "for it is now past eight o'clock—and I propose to retire to rest soon, in order to rise early in the morning. The time has passed so agreeably in your society, my worthy friends, and our conversation has been so varied——"

"But there is one thing I quite forgot to mention to your ladyship," exclaimed Farmer Brooks, as an idea struck him—"and that is, a lawyer's clerk was here yesterday inquiring for Lord Raymond Montgomery——"

"Ah! Mr. Rigden's clerk, I presume?" said the noble lady.

"Yes—that's the name of the lawyer who sent him," continued the farmer. "He came in a post-chaise—quite a bustle——"

"And so important withal," added Miss Brooks, who now joined in the conversation for the first time.

"Oh! he quite put my daughter out," exclaimed Brooks, laughing,—"by asking her such a host of questions. And when he found that we could give him no clue to search after Lord Raymond, he actually became saucy—said it was very queer—very suspicious——"

"And so I told him he had better go about his business," remarked Miss Brooks; "whereupon he grew more civil and even apologised for what he had been saying of an offensive character."

"And did he set off again on his return to London?" inquired the Marchioness of Bellenden.

"Nay, my lady—I believe not," responded Miss Brooks. "He said that he should make inquiries all over this neighbourhood—that he should proceed to the village of Bellenden—and that he should leave no stone unturned to discover some clue to his missing lordship. But it does not appear that he has much time for making his search, because he says that unless he can find him before midnight on the 30th of May——"

"He loses every possible pretension—even if he possessed any valid claim at all—to those estates," added the Marchioness. "Well, this is the 29th—to-morrow will be the 30th——"

"And the clerk swears with a terrible oath," said Brooks, "before the time runs up he would discover the young nobleman, either dead or alive."

"He is very positive, at all events," observed Lady Bellenden, with a smile. "So far as I am concerned, I should be truly pleased to hear of my unfortunate cousin's safety, and likewise of his happiness. It is his mother the Dowager-Countess and his brother Eugene the Earl, who have carried on the suit with a merciless perseverance against me;—and I believe that poor Raymond has been more their tool than their auxiliary."

"He always spoke of your ladyship in the most respectful terms," said Brooks; "and I have frequently heard him deplore the feuds which subsisted between yourself and his family—the more so that your ladyship's self was a Montgomery previous to your marriage with the late Marquis of Bellenden."

"Poor Lord Raymond!" observed the Marchioness, rising from her seat as a signal of her wish to retire for the night: "I most sincerely hope that we shall soon receive satisfactory tidings concerning him."

CHAPTER CCXVIII.

THE RAISING OF THE STONE.

It was about seven o'clock on the following morning that the Marchioness of Bellenden came forth from the homestead of Malden Farm, where she had passed the night, and proceeded on foot towards the spot where the bridge was being built. She was attended by the faithful Margaret, her steward and housekeeper from the adjacent Hall, together with Mr. and Mrs. Brooks and their daughter.

The noble lady, clad in the mourning garments which so much became her, walked a little in advance of the rest, but every now and then turned and spoke

do them with that courteous manner and truly gracious affability which seemed to constitute a part and parcel of her very nature.

On nearing the works, it was perceived that the massive poles had been raised over the buttress and the stout winch-rope already rigged for the purpose of lifting up the crowning-stone; and in fact every preparation was completed by the masons who had risen at a very early hour in order to accomplish them. The steward was provided with a large earthen vase filled with old and new specimens of coins; and the housekeeper carried a bottle of wine which her noble mistress was to break over the head of the buttress. But there were no spectators present in addition to the persons already mentioned, inasmuch as it was not known beyond this circle that the Marchioness had even arrived at Maiden Farm—much less that she contemplated any ceremonial of the nature which was about to take place.

But just as Lady Bellenden and her followers were within a few yards of the river's bank, the sounds of an approaching vehicle met their ears; and in a few instants a post-chaise emerged from the bye-lane which has before been alluded to as communicating with the road. And here we should perhaps observe that this bye-lane branched off amidst the woodlands into two routes—one effecting a junction with the high road to Birmingham and London, and the other leading to the beautiful village of Bellenden. It was therefore impossible to decide whether the post-chaise which now emerged from the lane, had come from the direction of Birmingham, or from that of the peaceful hamlet in whose church-vaults reposed the ashes of one of the proudest and mightiest families of the British aristocracy.

But the post-chaise stopped—the door was opened by a hand thrust forth from the window—and out jumped a thin, short, middle-aged man, who looked precisely what he indeed was.

"Mr. Rigden's clerk!" exclaimed Farmer Brooks, instantaneously recognising the bustling functionary as he approached the party with a quick step and an important self-complacency of manner.

"There is something afoot betimes this morning," he said, casting a rapid glance from one to another: then, as his looks settled upon the Marchioness, he gave a sort of start as if he were suddenly struck by the conviction who she was;—and raising his hat, he observed in a respectful tone, "I presume that I have the honour to find myself in the presence of her ladyship of Bellenden?"

The Marchioness bowed coldly and reservedly: for she was not prepossessed by the man's appearance, and she had no particular reason to like or esteem any one connected with Mr. Rigden.

"I have been hunting everywhere for your ladyship's cousin, the Lord Raymond Montgomery," said the clerk, unabashed by the freezing demeanour of the Marchioness; "and I cannot obtain the least clue to his whereabouts. I was at Bellenden village last night——"

"And I was there yesterday afternoon," said the noble lady, for the purpose of ascertaining whether the clerk had heard any particulars connected with her visit to the peaceful hamlet.

"So I was told," he observed, laconically. "I slept there last night—and now I am on my way back to London——"

"Indeed, sir, you have come out of your way, I can tell you," exclaimed Farmer Brooks. "On leaving the village you should not have taken to the bye-lanes at all——"

"I know that, my good man," interrupted the clerk: "but I chose to come round by Maiden Farm this morning—indeed, I got up at five o'clock on purpose—just to make a last inquiry concerning Lord Raymond and see whether anything had transpired with regard to him since I was here the day before yesterday. Because this is the 30th: and he must know that unless he fulfils a certain duty by twelve o'clock to-night, he loses any claim which he may now possess to the objects of litigation. I therefore fancied it just possible that he might have returned at the eleventh hour, as one might say——"

"I have heard nothing of his lordship, I can assure you," interrupted Farmer Brooks. "But I thought that you were resolved to find him out, dead or alive——"

"Upon my honour, my good fellow—and saving her ladyship's presence for talking thus familiarly," exclaimed Mr. Rigden's head clerk,—"I do really begin to feel assured that if Lord Raymond Montgomery should ever again turn up at all, it will be only as a corpse—and not as a being full of youthful vigour, and animation, and life."

"Good heavens! what makes you think *that*?" cried Farmer Brooks, while ejaculations of horror burst from the lips of the worthy man's wife and daughter.

"Oh! simply because people don't disappear in this kind of fashion without having met foul play," said the clerk. "But may I take the liberty of inquiring wherefore you are all abroad so early, and what is going on at the new bridge here?"

"Her ladyship is about to deposit a vase of coins in the hollow of that buttress," replied Farmer Brooks; "and the masons are at this moment on the point of lifting that huge crowning-stone."

"With her ladyship's permission I will remain a few minutes and witness the ceremony," said the clerk.

"I have not the slightest objection," returned the Marchioness: and with these words, she advanced close up to the spot where the masons had already begun to work the apparatus erected for the raising of the stone.

The steward, the housekeeper, Margaret Brooks, his wife, and his daughter, all took their station at a short distance behind the Marchioness: but the attorney's clerk stood forward to contemplate the process of lifting the huge mass of granite. Having dwelt all his life in London, and having spent the greater portion of that life behind a desk, he now felt just like a bird escaped from its cage;—and while the emerald scenery of the country was most grateful to his eye, every trifling incident which he encountered in his travels became a matter of interest with him. Thus was it that like a prying and curious school-boy, he now stood gazing on the operation that was in progress; and when the stone was raised a few inches from the mouth of the buttress, he bent down to carry his scrutiny to every feature and detail of the masonry and the mason's proceedings.

"How high shall we raise it, sir?" asked young Brooks of the steward.

"About a couple of feet—or perhaps a little more," was the response. "The jar containing the coins is a high one."

Silence then ensued once more—broken only by the creaking of the winch-rope and the grinding sound of the roller round which it was slowly, slowly winding.

In about ten minutes the stone was raised more than two feet from the mouth of the buttress;—and the steward desired the masons to desist from winding any more.

"What a putrid odour there is," said the lawyer's clerk, retreating a few paces from the buttress and sniffing with the disagreeable sensation.

"So there is," observed one of the masons.

"Depend upon it there's stagnant water inside the buttress," said the steward: "and if so, the foundation of the bridge can't be right. You must look to it before her ladyship commences the ceremony."

"Here! I will soon see what's the matter," exclaimed young Brooks: and dropping down upon his hands and knees, he protruded his head beneath the overhanging stone so as to look down into the hollow of the buttress.

"Well—what is it?" demanded the overseer of the masons.

"The smell is bad enough—but I cannot see anything shining like water. And yet—there is something—but it is dark—and all huddled up——My God! yes—it is—it is—the corpse of a man!"

And as these ejaculations, vented in horror, struck thrillingly through every brain and to every heart, kindred echoes burst from the lips of those present.

"A corpse!" exclaimed the steward, springing forward.

"And it smells like one," said the lawyer's clerk.

"Good heavens! is it possible!" cried the Marchioness of Bellenden, exchanging a rapid look of deep meaning with Margaret.

"Come, now—don't stand idling there," vociferated the overseer to his men: "but lift the stone a little higher, and let some one get ready a hook and a cord."

The windlass began to groan and the winch-rope to creak again; while young Brooks, having fastened an iron hook to a piece of cord, dropped it into the buttress. The spectators stood gazing on the operations, with outstretched necks, fixed looks, lips apart, and attitudes of painful suspense; but ejaculations of horror again burst from their tongues, when they perceived by the motions of young Brooks that he was dragging up some heavy object.

And, sure enough! it *was* a corpse that the hook and the cord were now bringing to the mouth of the buttress: but how appalling was the consternation which appeared to seize upon all present, when the farmer's son exclaimed in a tone of mingled horror and amazement, "Good God! 'tis Lord Raymond!"

The Marchioness, having exchanged another rapid and meaning glance with Margaret, rushed forward as if to assure herself that such was indeed the fact: Mrs. Brooks and her daughter both became so dreadfully agitated that it was found necessary to remove them from the spot;—and the lawyer's clerk exclaimed, "Well, I declared that I would see the young lord, either alive or dead, before I quitted these parts!"

The corpse was now completely dragged forth from the interior of the buttress and stretched upon the ground. It was much decomposed: but there was no difficulty in identifying it as that of Lord Raymond Montgomery. The long fair hair, matted and damp with the clammy dews of death though it were, still remained: the apparel, soiled and even rotting in many parts as it was, was also recognised;—and, in fine, though the countenance was livid and disfigured, there could be no doubt that in the decomposing carcase which lay at their feet, the horror-stricken spectators beheld the remains of the once handsome, elegant, but unfortunate Raymond.

But in order that no evidence calculated to establish this identity should remain disregarded, the pockets of the deceased were searched. A purse full of money was found upon him—his watch was safe in his fob—and on his finger was a diamond ring immense value. It therefore became evident that, if he had been foully dealt with, plunder was not the object of his assassins. But his papers—his letters? Ah! these were indeed found in his pocket-book: but the damp had committed such ravages upon them, that all the writing was utterly obliterated, and the documents themselves fell to pieces when touched.

And now arose the questions, "Was it really murder, or might it not have been suicide?"—and "If it were murder, who could have done it?"

"Murder—and nothing less," exclaimed Mr. Rigden's head clerk, who had all his wits about him despite the shocking scene whereof he had so unexpectedly become a witness. "Look here—the mouth is held open by a gag—something between the teeth—it seems like a bit of sponge——"

"And so it is," said the overseer. "Poor young gentleman—he has been foully murdered!"

"And it was on the very day of his disappearance that the stone was found to have fallen," observed young Brooks.

"True, lad," said the overseer. "And what's more, one of the men declared at the time that as he was coming down yon hill to his work, he saw a carriage driving away post-haste up the lane: but we didn't think much about it then——"

"And now that incident becomes of value and importance," the Marchioness of Bellenden hastened to observe. "For my part, I take the earliest opportunity of declaring that no one in this district must be suspected of the deed—no one dwelling in this vicinage must be pointed to as the supposed author of the tremendous crime! No—that carriage which was seen departing so hurriedly on the morning of the catastrophe, affords the clue—the *only* feasible clue—to the reading of the mystery; and the justice of heaven will sooner or later overtake the murderer."

"Provided the chain of evidence is duly followed up, my lady," said the lawyer's clerk; "and I admit with your ladyship that the circumstance of the carriage is the first link in that chain. As for suspecting any of these honest people about here, it is out of the question," added the man of business, in whose mind a suspicion was already rising up,—a suspicion which, though as yet faint and vague in its inception, was still strong enough to prompt the declaration he had just made.

"I am glad, sir, that you echo my own belief," said the Marchioness, now speaking in a conciliatory tone to the attorney's clerk and abandoning the reserve she had hitherto maintained towards him. "Your legal experience is an important auxiliary in this difficult and delicate business; and you deserve the best thanks of all present for the manly and honest way in which you expressed your opinion. It would be cruel indeed if unjust suspicion fell upon any individual who could have had no earthly motive for the perpetration of this dreadful crime."

"There will be an inquest, of course, my lady," said the steward; "and then the whole matter will be duly and properly investigated. Meantime, all opinions should be suspended."

"Precisely so," observed the Marchioness. "Let the corpse be conveyed to the Hall and the usual notice sent to the Coroner. I am compelled to depart forthwith on my return to London: but should my presence be needed for any purpose, my steward will communicate with me, and in a few days I shall be enabled to revisit this neighbourhood, if required."

"And I must also depart at once," said Mr. Rigden's clerk: then, having made a low obeisance to the Marchioness, he hurried back to his post-chaise, which immediately drove away.

The corpse of Lord Raymond Montgomery was covered with a sheet brought from Malden Farm, and borne upon a stretcher to Bellenden Hall. The ceremony respecting the bridge was of course abandoned under the mournful circumstances which had transpired;—and the Marchioness returned to the homestead where she had passed the night.

"Oh! my lady," said Brooks, now approaching her with anguish and dismay pictured upon his countenance,—"I hope your ladyship is well assured——"

"That you are innocent of this crime?" exclaimed the Marchioness, in a tone of firm decision. "I am certain that you are, my good friend—morally certain," she added with a stronger emphasis still. "Do not alarm yourself—do not let your wife and children give way to despondency: I will protect you—because I know you to be innocent!"

"God be thanked—and heaven bless your ladyship," said Brooks, dropping upon one knee, seizing the fair hand of the Marchioness, and pressing it to his lips: then, springing to his feet again, he hurried into the adjacent room to convey to his family the solacing assurance which he had just received.

"Now Margaret," said Lady Bellenden, as soon as the noble lady and her faithful dependant were alone together in the parlour of Malden Farm,—"give me writing materials and I will leave a note for Richard, who will doubtless be here in the course of the day. He must travel post-haste after us—for to-morrow will be a busy and an eventful day for us in London."

"And these poor people here, Laura?" said Margaret, in a tone of anxious inquiry.

"No harm shall be permitted to overtake them," responded the Marchioness, emphatically. "Were suspicion to involve them in any embarrassment or dilemma, the whole truth should be at once proclaimed relative to the tragedy of Malden Bridge. Yes—everything should be revealed, happen what would!"

"I am glad to hear that such is your determination, my dear Laura," observed Margaret: "and now for the letter—as I perceive that the travelling-carriage is in readiness."

The note was accordingly penned and given to Brooks to be delivered to Richard the moment he should arrive at the farm: the Marchioness then expressed her thanks to the yeoman and his family for their hospitality;—and, having once more assured them they had nothing to fear in respect to the discovery of Lord Raymond's corpse, she took her departure in company with the faithful Margaret.

CHAPTER CCXIX.

A MEETING OF OLD ACQUAINTANCES.

We must now transport our readers back to London, in order to relate an incident which occurred on the same day as that which has been marked by the events just chronicled.

It was about noon—and Tim Meagles was riding on horseback along the Edgeware Road, when his attention was suddenly rivetted upon the slight and graceful form of a young lady clad in mourning. She was proceeding rapidly along, with her veil drawn over her countenance: but the beauty of her figure—the musical charm of her walk—and the sable apparel which she wore, all convinced him that she was indeed the fair young girl whom he had longed to meet once again—if no more than *once!*

Pressing his horse towards the footway, Meagles said in a low earnest tone, "Miss Foster!"

The maiden turned—gave utterance to a cry of mingled amazement and joy—and then, bounding towards Tim, took his hand and pressed it warmly.

"God be praised that you are safe and at liberty!" exclaimed the warm-hearted girl in all the enthusiasm of her fervid, ingenuous, noble gratitude.

"And you, Miss Foster—are you happy?" inquired Meagles, putting the question with an impatience and awaiting the reply with a visible anxiety which showed how deeply interested he felt in the condition of the orphan maiden.

"I have every reason to be so," she responded, throwing up her veil at the same time, so as not to have the air of treating as a stranger an individual to whom she lay under so many obligations, and whom she knew to have suffered for her sake. "But I am residing in this neighbourhood, Mr. Meagles," she added: "and although my kind benefactress is from home at present, yet she will not chide me for inviting so kind and disinterested a friend as you have proved yourself to be, to enter her mansion and rest awhile."

"I accept the invitation cheerfully, Miss Foster," said Meagles; "the more so, inasmuch as I am anxious to hear an account of any favourable change which has taken place in your fortunes."

"This is the mansion where I dwell," said Rose, stepping up to the gate of Bellenden Priory: then, ringing the bell, she desired the porter who made his appearance to take charge of Mr. Meagles' horse.

Tim accordingly dismounted and tossed the reins of his steed to the domestic,—for he had ridden out alone on this particular morning, Wasp having been despatched with a message on some important business. Rose Foster led the way across the beautiful gardens, and introduced Meagles into an elegant parlour, where she ordered refreshments to be served up;—then, having quitted him for a few minutes in order to lay aside her bonnet and shawl in her own chamber, she returned with a countenance expressing the most unfeigned satisfaction at being enabled to testify, however slightly, the sense of gratitude which she experienced towards him. But when Meagles saw that charming girl come and seat herself by his side with all the ingenuous, artless confidence which a sister shows towards a brother, he could not help sighing at the thought that the feeling which animated her was nothing more tender than a grateful friendship.

"And now, Mr. Meagles," she said, "you must permit me to declare how deep and lasting has been the sense which I have entertained of all the obligations I owe you. You have doubtless read or heard of the fearful accusation which for a moment threatened to overwhelm me ——"

"Yes—I have read all that in a file of newspapers,

since my return home," said Meagles. "And did you find a friend in Lady Bellenden—for I am aware that this is her ladyship's residence ——"

"I found a friend in the Marchioness on the very day of my most bitter need," returned the maiden. "When discharged by the magistrate from the fearful accusation to which I have alluded, I was conducted straight hither and introduced to her ladyship. She received me with open arms—and here have I since dwelt in security and happiness. No—not in perfect happiness," added Rose, hastily: "for I have entertained sore misgivings relative to yourself and the good-hearted working-man, James Melmoth. The very day after I had found an asylum beneath this roof, I explained to the Marchioness of Bellenden all the obligations I owed alike to yourself and Melmoth; and I besought her to send and make inquiries concerning you, as well as communicate to you both the fact that I had taken up my residence at her mansion. For I had heard nothing of either you or Mr. Melmoth since that day when you burst into Mrs. Brace's house to rescue me from my royal persecutor, and when the constables assailed you both with their bludgeons. The Marchioness accordingly despatched her confidential domestic Richard to execute my commissions; but on his return I was destined to hear accounts that filled me with the cruellest alarms. In Jermyn Street Richard was informed that you had been expatriated to America for seditious designs against the King; and that you had been sent off on a particular day which was mentioned by your landlady. In Westminster, Richard learnt that Mr. Melmoth had likewise been transported on a certain day by the Government authorities, and that his family had quitted their humble lodgings only four-and-twenty hours previously to my thus sending to inquire after them. Richard could not ascertain whither the poor mother and her children had gone; but he feared from the way in which the cross landlady of the lodging-house answered him, that she had behaved harshly towards them. Oh! how it grieved me to remain in that condition of uncertainty relative to those poor people! But while I was pondering upon the apparently extraordinary coincidence that yourself and Melmoth should have been expatriated on the same day and for the same alleged offence, it struck me that it was the identical day on which you had so generously flown to my assistance at Mrs. Brace's house. Oh! all the treachery of the Prince became apparent to me then in a moment—and I saw that yourself and the generous-hearted Melmoth had become involved in ruin on my account! I addressed a letter full of remonstrance—full of upbraiding—full of supplication to his Royal Highness,—appealing to him on your behalf, and reminding him that his suppliant was the daughter of the man whom his crime had made a suicide! But I did not state in that letter where I was residing;—you can full well divine, Mr. Meagles, that I dared not incur the risk of becoming the object of his base persecution any more. My letter, then, as a matter of course remained unanswered, and I continued in ignorance of the effect which it had produced—or rather, whether it produced any at all! But every now and then I have sent to Jermyn Street to inquire whether any tidings had been received concerning you—and at the same time I have not forgotten to send to the lodging-house in Westminster, in the hope of hearing intelligence with regard to that poor family! But to all the inquiries which I thus caused to be instituted, a negative was invariably returned. It must now be upwards of a fortnight since I last sent to Jermyn Street—and I should have despatched a domestic thither to-morrow or next day, had I not so fortunately and so happily encountered you this morning."

"And it is within the last fortnight that I have returned to London, Miss Foster," said Meagles. "My landlady informed me that numerous inquiries had been made concerning me while I was absent: but she did not tell me that any servant of Lady Bellenden's had called."

"Because I had charged my messengers, on every occasion, to deliver into your hands a note which I had written to you, and which was not to be left unless you were there in person to receive it. Ah! Mr. Meagles," exclaimed the young lady, "you can well understand how cautious I am compelled to be in order to avoid every chance or risk of being discovered by my royal persecutor! I had heard, through Richard, that your lodgings had been searched and your papers taken away—and I feared that if a note were left there for you, containing my address, it might perchance fall into the hands of persons devoted to the interests of the Prince."

"And you acted prudently, Miss Foster," said Meagles. "Ah! I have indeed been treated with foul ingratitude by that Prince, and with a diabolical tyranny by the Government: but in monarchical countries, all Princes are tyrants and all Governments tyrannical. Condemned without trial—sentenced to deportation upon a fictitious charge—and hurried down to Woolwich immediately after our judgment was pronounced by a secret conclave of Government hirelings and tools, Melmoth and myself were ordered to be placed on board the *Diana* frigate, which was waiting to sail for North America. I was securely lodged in the ship: but Melmoth sprang into the deep waters, and under cover of night was borne either to death or safety—I know not which! The *Diana* sailed—some weeks passed—and already were we nearing the American coast, when we were overtaken by a fast-sailing vessel which had been despatched after us, and which was the bearer of my pardon. This pardon had been procured for me by the intervention of a magnanimous friend; and now that I have returned to England, I am devoting myself to the task of persecuting this Royal Family which knows so well how to persecute others."

"And you are not aware what has become of poor Melmoth's family?" said Rose Foster, with a deep sigh as she thought of the probability of the unfortunate creatures being foodless, houseless, and friendless.

"I have not succeeded in finding the faintest clue to their whereabouts," responded Meagles: then, as he gazed intently upon the beauteous and indeed angelic countenance of the maiden, he said in a lower and deeper tone than was his wont, "I thank you, Miss Foster, for the kind interest which you have displayed on my behalf; and I can assure you that while I was a sojourner upon the bosom of the Atlantic, I often and often experienced a profound anguish at the uncertainty in which I remained with regard to your fate. I remembered—Oh! indeed, how could I forget—that you were left, when I saw you last, in the power of that princely ruffian whom I knew to be merciless and unprincipled, pitiless and inhuman. I trembled for you—my God! I trembled for you, Rose——"

"But heaven shielded me, my good friend," mur-

mured the maiden: for she felt that the answer which she had just given him was in effect a declaration that her innocence remained intact and that she had passed pure and spotless through the ordeal of temptation, persecution, and violence.

"Yes—the moment that I saw your beauteous countenance," exclaimed Meagles, "when you raised your veil ere now in the Edgeware Road, I knew that heaven *had* shielded you—for virtue, candour, and chastity are depicted upon your features the same as when I first formed your acquaintance at the beginning of this memorable year."

The partial excitement—or rather impassioned tone in which Meagles had just spoken, and which contrasted so remarkably with the low deepness of voice that he had previously adopted, struck Rose Foster with surprise;—and she gazed upon him with a half frightened, half-deprecating look.

"Do you not understand me, Rose?—do you not comprehend all I would say to you, if I could find language wherein to clothe my feelings?" exclaimed Meagles, now for the first time in his life finding himself embarrassed for words to express his thoughts. "You experience a friendship for me—do you not?"

"Oh! most assuredly—most assuredly!" cried the grateful girl. "I look upon you as a benefactor—a kind friend—a brother I might almost say ——"

"Well—a brother, then," interrupted Meagles, feeling as if he could go down upon his knees and worship that pure and innocent girl who thus proffered him as it were her sisterly affection. "But tell me, Rose—tell me," he said, with strange abruptness, "have you as yet encountered any one whom you love better than a brother?"

The maiden became scarlet: and yet she was not altogether angry. But she was suddenly overwhelmed with shame and confusion;—yes—and she now comprehended the fact that Meagles loved her, and that he was floundering in his awkward endeavours to make her aware of his passion. For a moment she had felt vexed and annoyed at the query which he put to her: but on a second thought she remembered all his chivalrous kindness toward her and all he had suffered so uncomplainingly on her account;—and her anger, dissolving like snow, was succeeded by a profound sorrow at the fact that she was loved by one who possessed such large claims on her gratitude, but whom she could not possibly love in return.

"Ah! that tell-tale blush!" exclaimed Meagles, starting from his chair and speaking in a tone of vexation. "Catch a young girl who is not in love," he muttered to himself: then instantaneously feeling how ungenerous it was on his part thus to give vent to any sentiment of annoyance towards the pure-minded artless girl, he caught her by the hand, exclaiming, "God bless you, Rose—God bless you! Not for worlds—no, not for worlds, would I say or do aught to give you pain. Poor girl! you have already seen and known suffering enough in this world—and if it lay within the power of any man to ensure your happiness by cutting his right hand off, it should be cheerfully done by Tim Meagles."

The tears rolled down the cheeks of Rose Foster as she saw by her friend's swimming eyes, and quivering lips, and muscular nervousness of features, how deeply he was moved—how profoundly affected: and she comprehended that he loved her well and that he was waiving all claim upon her heart and hand as a sacrifice which he generously made to her happiness.

"Yes—I was a madman and a fool ever to dream of possessing thee, Rose," he said, after a short pause, during which he gazed upon her with an earnest and yet most respectful admiration: "such a gem as thou art was not formed to place in a diadem made of dross, but in a crown of the purest gold! Well—may'st thou be happy, sweet girl, with whomsoever thou shalt mate thyself;—and never, never shalt thou want a friend so long as thou hast confidence in plain, blunt Tim Meagles."

Thus speaking, he imprinted a kiss upon her white and stainless brow;—nor with a maudlin prudery did she turn away. On the contrary, she received that kiss as if it were bestowed upon her by a brother,—a kiss from which she would not have shrunk had George Woodfall himself been present, and which she would not be ashamed to own when next they met.

"And now, Rose," said Meagles, after drinking a glass of the wine which had been placed on a side table, "I shall bid you farewell for the present: in a few days you may expect to see me again—and henceforth," he added, with a solemn significancy, "I shall regard you as a friend—as a sister."

Rose pressed his hand in acknowledgment of the kind feeling which prompted this assurance; and Meagles then took his leave of the orphan daughter of the suicide merchant.

"Well, I feel happier and more composed now that I have seen her," said Tim to himself, as he threaded the gardens of the Priory. "If she had accepted my suit, I should certainly have proved faithless to poor Letitia—and that would have been a scoundrel's trick on my part: but as Rose is already provided with a lover, I am saved from anything like treachery towards the Amazon. So, after all, Letitia will be my wife—a marchioness, no doubt—because it is impossible that the old king, blackguard and scoundrel as he is, can fly from his engagements with me. If he did, I could soon enforce their observance."

Tim Meagles arrived at this very satisfactory conclusion and at the garden-gate simultaneously;—and the latter being opened, he issued forth. But just as he was in the act of mounting his horse, he beheld a man with a well-known countenance passing along the Edgeware Road: and once more tossing the reins to Lady Bellenden's porter, he bounded on foot after the object of his suddenly-awakened interest.

"Melmoth!" he exclaimed, clutching the individual by the shoulder.

"Ah! that voice!" cried the working-man, as he stopped short and turned with a sudden start. "Yes—'tis you—thank God!"—and seizing Meagles by the hand, Melmoth burst into tears of joy at this most unexpected but most welcome encounter. "Where can we go to converse for a short time?" he inquired after a long pause.

"I have just left Miss Foster—she resides in that handsome building, and will be truly rejoiced to see you," said Meagles. "Indeed, not ten minutes have elapsed since we were both talking about you. Come along with me, then——"

"No—I cannot face that young creature, Mr. Meagles," interrupted Melmoth, bitterly: and now Tim noticed for the first time that there was something wild and strange in the expression of the man's eyes.

"Why not?" demanded Meagles. "You have never done anything to injure her—and she speaks of you with gratitude and warm friendship. Indeed, she has been searching after you and yours——"

"Nevertheless," interrupted Melmoth, doggedly

I cannot think of appearing in the presence of the young maiden——that is to say, if she is pure, chaste, and innocent as she was when first I knew her."

"She is—she is — beyond all doubt!" exclaimed Meagles.

"Then I will not see her," responded Melmoth. "Criminal—vile—polluted—degraded—and infamous as I am," he continued in a tone of wildly increasing excitement, "I should only shock her delicate nature —outrage her best feelings with my fearful confessions——"

"Good heavens! what has happened to you, Melmoth?—what is the matter with you?" demanded Meagles. "Come—here is a tavern close by—we will enter it—we will engage a private room—and there we can talk at our ease."

"With all my heart," replied Melmoth.

CHAPTER CCXX.

REVELATIONS OF THE MONSTER-MAN.

Upon being seated together in a parlour at the tavern, Tim Meagles was enabled to examine James Melmoth more attentively than during the hurried and excited discourse on the foot-way of the Edgeware Road. He now observed that there was not only something strange and wild in Melmoth's looks, but an expression positively sinister and ferocious: now the eyes had a fixed and savage glare like those of a tiger when gazing on an enemy whom he longs to reach but cannot—and then those balls glittered with the vacillating, changeful, but still lurid light which showed a disordered mind and unsettled reason. The man's countenance was pale, sallow, and care-worn—and the melancholy that was expressed in all the lower portion of his features contrasted strongly with the fiercer and darker passions that left their trace on his brow and lighted their fires in his eyes. As for his apparel, he was clad in a decent suit of clothes; and his personal appearance so far indicated anything but penury or distress.

"And now, Melmoth," said Tim Meagles, "when the waiter had placed a bottle of wine upon the table and had withdrawn,—"now tell me all that has happened to you since we parted off Woolwich nearly three months ago. That terrible and strange things have befallen you, I can divine too easily: your looks, my poor friend, bespeak you an altered man."

"Altered!—yes—terribly altered, Mr. Meagles!" ejaculated Melmoth, with a burning look and an iron emphasis, as he struck his clenched fist forcibly upon the table. "So altered, my dear sir," he continued, in an accent of satire and sardonism, now blending with the ferocity of his voice and making it more dreadful to hear,—"so altered, I say, that the man has become a monster!"

"What mean you?" demanded Tim, shuddering, he knew not why—but with that same instinctive feeling which causes a tremor to creep cold and clammy over a man when he enters a room where he knows there is a huge snake, and even before he has yet set eyes upon it.

"I mean," returned Melmoth, "that this accursed state of society which titled rogues, pensioned rascals, high-born demireps, and bloated hypocrites love to applaud as a consummate civilization, is nothing more nor less than the cruellest and most savage barbarism; —yes—barbarism all the more cruel and all the more savage, because it commits ten thousand crimes daily in the name of humanity, and Christian love, and philanthropy, and justice, and mercy! It plunges families into workhouses—and vaunts its *humanity!* —it dooms four-fifths of the population to misery, wretchedness, and crushing toil, and dares to talk of *Christian love* being made practical!—it fills the streets with prostitutes and mendicants, and inculcates *philanthropy!*—it hangs, transports, or imprisons men who demand their rights; and these it persecutes in the name of *justice!*—it enacts a hundred thousand laws to coerce the poor, and not one to compel the rich to do their duty—and this is *mercy!* Now can you wonder, Mr. Meagles, if a sensitive man should be goaded to desperation by such a system as this?—can you wonder if an individual, who himself abounds in Christian love and comprehends the true meaning of justice and mercy, should be driven to madness by the horrors which are perpetrated under the cover of our pretended civilization?—can you be surprised if goading tyranny and grinding persecution should pervert all feelings—change all instincts—and turn man's very nature inside out? It would be wondrous indeed if such were not the effects of so vile a system!—wondrous if the lamb did not now and then change into the lion—and man become the monster! Well, Mr. Meagles, so was it with me —and I, a man some short while since, have been turned into a monster."

"How wildly—how terribly you talk!" exclaimed Meagles, almost frightened—brave and dauntless though he naturally was—by Melmoth's words and manner.

"And yet you must prepare to hear things more wild and terrible still, Mr. Meagles," said the unhappy wretch, "if you persist in knowing my history."

"I do persist—I am anxious to hear it," returned Meagles, still with a cold shudder—as if the dreadful things that were coming already rose looming in spectral shapes and ghastly forms amidst the haze of distance. "Do not be afraid to make me your confidant: if you have committed murder, I would not raise a hand against you—no, nor even upbraid you —for I should know that you are a victim, and not a criminal—that society is the real offender, and you only the instrument. Fear not, then, to reveal all—to confess everything—and you may expect pity, but not blame!"

"But, my good friend," exclaimed Melmoth, suddenly raising his voice as if it were a whirlwind,—"you will have to listen to atrocities that will make your blood run cold——"

"Hush! hush!" said Meagles, in alarm lest the man's loud voice should be overheard.

"And your hair stand on end——"

"Hush! hush! I say."

"And the very flesh creep upon your bones!"

"For God's sake, moderate your tone."

"Ah! to be sure," exclaimed Melmoth: "I forgot that we might be overheard. But are you prepared——"

"I am prepared to hear anything, no matter how dreadful—how appalling," responded Meagles. "I shall not wince."

"Do not make too sure. Let me see what you can stand in the shape of horrors—how much your nerves can endure in the shape of monstrosities. But when did you return to London?"

"Nearly a fortnight ago," answered Meagles. "I received a pardon—a pardon for nothing——"

FERNANDA.

"Well—a fortnight ago," said Melmoth, in a musing tone. "But have you heard or read, since your return, of certain atrocities committed in church-yards,—how the dead have been dug up and horribly mutilated——"

"Yes—I have read of those frightful proceedings," observed Tim, with a cold shudder. "Have you done aught more shocking—more revolting—more unaccountably damnable than the freaks which the unknown monster has performed?"

"Ah! I see that you are not fitted to hear my tale," said Melmoth, almost contemptuously.

"Why not? Oh! but I am," exclaimed Meagles, his curiosity now becoming acutely painful and poignantly torturing. "Come—proceed."

"And if I relate deeds as frightful as those to which a faint allusion ere now made you shudder visibly——"

"I shall not be shocked—I am prepared for them now."

"'Tis well. Would you like to know, before I begin, who was the perpetrator of those horrors—the fiend that committed those ghastly deeds? If so, I can tell you—for I know him——"

"Who is he?" said Meagles, his knees quivering and his teeth chattering with cold horror.

"I!" was the terrible answer.

Tim Meagles bounded upon his seat, as if suddenly galvanised—or as if a frightful pang had suddenly shot through his entire frame.

"I told you, sir," said Melmoth, with a ferocious coolness, "that you were not half prepared to listen to such a history as mine. Farewell: I will depart!"—and he rose from his seat with a gesture of impatience.

"No—stay, I conjure you," exclaimed Meagles, now recovering himself: then, swallowing two bumpers of wine the one close upon the other, he said, "Pardon the excitement which I manifested—and believe me now when I solemnly aver that

I am prepared at length to hear all and everything you may have to relate."

"You are the best judge of your own nerves, after all," said Melmoth, resuming his seat. "Listen, then—and interrupt me as little as possible; because I easily lose the thread of my narrative, as my brain is not always as clear and collected as I could wish. Well, then, you remember that night on which you and I were put into the boat at Woolwich and taken off to the *Diana* as she lay at anchor. I managed to get off my chains — and, watching the opportunity, I plunged into the river. Down, down, under the ship's bottom I dived—all my wits about me—my memory as keen and my mental perception as clear while thus engulfed, as ever my faculties were strong and lucid in the soberest and calmest moments of my life. I swam under the ship in the lengthways' direction in which she lay, and emerged close by her helm. There I remained clinging to the chains of the rudder for a few minutes, while the hubbub caused by my flight lasted. Lights were hung over — and I dived again: then boats were put out — and I dodged about the stern of the ship for upwards of a quarter of an hour — sometimes under the water, and sometimes with only just my head above it. At length I swam cautiously and quietly away—diving incessantly until I reached the Essex shore, about two hundred yards farther down than where the vessel lay. I landed and walked along the bank for upwards of an hour; till at last, in the utter darkness of the night, I fell into a deep muddy ditch. Thence I had the greatest trouble to extricate myself: and being covered with slime, I was forced to plunge into the river to cleanse myself. I suppose that my head must have struck against something—for I became insensible: and when I recovered myself, I was in a hut at the village of Gray's Thurlock, several miles farther down the river than where I had taken the path that so nearly proved fatal to me. An old waterman had picked me up as I was floating down with the tide: a glimpse of moonlight upon the water had shown him my countenance as I lay senseless on my back. On getting me ashore, he found that life was not extinct; and being a humane man (as most poor people are, by way of set-off to the hard-hearted aristocracy) he conveyed me to his hut, where he and his wife attended upon me. I recovered in a few hours: but for several days I was unable to rise from the humble pallet on which I lay stretched. At length I grew strong enough to get up; and not choosing to remain a burthen to my good friends—anxious moreover to see my wife and dear, dear children—I said I should leave them. The report of my escape off Woolwich had reached Gray's Thurlock, as a matter of course; and the old waterman suspected that I was the individual. He spoke kindly to me upon the subject—and I told him everything. Then he became a true friend to me—bestowing upon me a suit of sailor's clothing as a disguise, and giving me a few shillings to see my way clear with. I returned to London: Oh! how my heart beat—how every pulse thrilled with the fervid, joyous hope of embracing my beloved wife and little ones again. Heedless of the risk I incurred of being recognised by any hostile person who might give information to the Government, I hurried to the lodgings where I hoped to find my family. Heavens! how long the street seemed from the corner to the house—what an age it appeared before my knock at the door was answered! To clasp my wife in my arms—to embrace my little ones—to see poor baby's innocent face again—Ah! that would be a reward for all I had suffered! The door opened—and the landlady appeared on the threshold. She was frightened when she saw me—she guessed that I had escaped—and she was afraid of getting into trouble by even speaking to me. I beheld all the embarrassment of her manner—and my heart sank within me. I apprehended something dreadful: nor was I deceived in that harrowing presentiment. My family had been compelled to leave their lodging—in plain terms, they had been ejected! I restrained my fury while I put some questions to the landlady: she was frightened at me and besought me to depart, hinting that the Government officials might observe and arrest me. I saw that if I gave way to violence I should only invoke a renewal of the persecution whence I had escaped; and I accordingly maintained a forced composure. But this was all on a sudden interrupted by an outburst of bitter weeping—for my feelings overpowered me. Even the landlady, wretch as she was, seemed moved; and by way of consoling, or perhaps of appeasing me, she volunteered the assurance that if any stranger called to inquire after me, she would not say that I had been there. As for my wife and family, the woman knew not where they had gone; and I departed from her presence in a state of mind which no culprit about to ascend the scaffold need have envied."

"Poor man!" said Tim Meagles, profoundly touched. "As for the landlady, she kept her promise to you, harshly though she might have behaved to your wife and children: for Miss Rose Foster has sent to make frequent inquiries at your old lodgings concerning you—and the servants who called there on her behalf never could glean any intelligence with regard to you."

"For this reason, then," observed Melmoth, laconically, "I will spare her. Otherwise I had intended to immolate her amongst the rest of my enemies. Oh! you may gaze upon me with horrified looks, Mr. Meagles: but you have tremendous things to hear ere we separate! However—to resume the thread of my story—I was telling you that I took my departure from the landlady's abode in a condition of mind not to be envied by any living being—no, not even by the most grovelling wretch that crawls upon the face of the earth, nor by the condemned felon who looks Death face to face! Oh! my poor wife—my dearly beloved children! whither had ye gone?—wherefore was I thus deprived of your love, your solace?—why were we not permitted to meet and mingle our tears? But I saw it all: I comprehended the villany that had been perpetrated. It was quite clear that the money which I had sent from Woolwich along with the letter, had never reached them:—it had doubtless been kept by the villanous peace-officer—and they were turned into the streets. O God! how bitter, how diabolical, how fiendish was the curse that rose up in my soul at that moment,—a curse menacing the whole framework of society with ruin, blood, murder, and vengeance,—such a curse, in fine, as a desperate man might be expected to vent upon a world that

had lacerated, tortured, scourged, persecuted, and goaded him so cruelly—so maddeningly! Yes—I breathed a curse——not aloud——no, it was to myself: for that curse was too awful—too hideous—too damnable to be shaped in words or clothed in language, until the mind had become familiar with it by frequent contemplation. And now, that I have so long—so steadfastly—so continuously viewed that curse face to face, I may unhesitatingly tell thee, Mr. Meagles, that it summed up all the mischiefs I would possibly work against society and all the horrors with which I could startle it. I looked upon the world as a pandemonium—and I determined to have a fiend's revenge. At all events, if this earth were not really hell already,—then I vowed to open hell at the feet of all whom my influence could reach. I wandered out into the suburbs of St. Pancras with these thoughts uppermost in my mind; and I saw a funeral pass. I beheld the mourners weeping—the friends and relatives with their countenances buried in their handkerchiefs. I heard the sobs of some of them, and thence knew that their grief was real. Mechanically I followed the funeral into Old St. Pancras Churchyard:—I saw the coffin lowered into the earth—I beheld the soil shovelled down upon it—I marked the intense anguish of the mourners. And as I thus gazed upon them, I was suddenly struck by the features of the chief mourner as he withdrew his handkerchief from his face for a few moments. Heavens! it was the peace-officer to whom I had entrusted the money and the letter at Woolwich, and who had robbed my poor family of the gold they so much wanted. Yes—the peace-officer it was: and fortunate was it that his grief was so absorbing as to prevent him from taking any notice of me—or else he might have recognised me, despite my sailor's apparel. Mingling with the spectators, I learnt that it was the peace-officer's own father whose remains had just been committed to the ground. Oh! at that moment all hell seemed to flame up and rage in my bosom: terrible thoughts took possession of my brain—tremendous ideas began floating vaguely about in my imagination, as monstrous serpents would seem in the depths of the green sea-waters. Shuddering at the appalling promptings which were beginning to influence me—goaded to frenzy by my own thoughts, and endeavouring to outstrip them, I fled from the place. For three or four days, however, I haunted the neighbourhood,—circling as it were about that lonely churchyard, as a vulture flies round and round the carcase on which it is about to pounce, each time narrowing the circumference of its whirl. At last the fearful ideas which were agitating in my brain, seemed to combine all their force—concentrate all their power—and act as a tremendous spell upon me. A violent headache—a cruelly painful nervousness—an audible beating of the heart—and a fever-heat all over my body,—these were now the principal symptoms of the frightful monomania that was gaining so appalling an ascendancy over me. It was an impulsive insanity which I could not resist,—a frenzy exercising an indomitable control over my passions, my senses, and my very actions,—the concentration as it were of all the venom, all the rage, all the fury, and all the fire of that stupendous curse which the hell of my feelings had thrown up in their despair! At length, unable to bear up against the torrent of impulses which were overwhelming me, I went and purchased a spade;—and when night came, I entered the churchyard of Old St. Pancras—I dug open the grave—I tore up the corpse of the peace-officer's father—and I mutilated it horribly with the shovel."

"Eternal God! this is dreadful!" exclaimed Meagles, bounding upon his chair, while his cheeks grew blanched and his lips quivered with indescribable feelings of terror and disgust.

"Ah! I told you that it was necessary to prepare yourself to hear appalling things," said Melmoth, with a hollow mocking laugh. "Shall I cease?—or shall I continue?" he demanded, after a pause and in a tone of indifference.

"Proceed, proceed," returned Meagles: "and you must make allowances for any display of wonder or excitement on my part. I will however restrain myself as well as I am able. Go on. You were telling me that you exhumed the corpse of the peace-officer's father—and that you mutilated it horribly."

"And the moon shone cold, serene, and placid upon the deed," observed Melmoth. "But no sooner had I accomplished it—no sooner had I hacked and hewed the senseless corse of the old man with as furious a vindictiveness and as ferocious a heartiness as if it had been the living peace-officer himself—no sooner had I thus yielded, I say, to that monomania of so frightful a character, when an awful reaction took place within me. The herculean strength that I had manifested in hollowing the grave, dissolved rapidly into a child's weakness;—the raging excitement that had hurried me along subsided into the deepest despondency;—the feverish heat that had made my whole frame appear as if every artery and vein were boiling with a lava-stream, was succeeded by a cold sweat;—and a sense of overpowering debility coming upon me, as if my very life were ebbing away, I sank down by the side of the corpse which I had mutilated. Consciousness abandoned me—and when I awoke to life again, the deep tone of the church clock proclaimed the hour of one in the morning. I had remained an hour in that profound lethargy—a lethargy so closely resembling death itself, while it lasted! And on thus returning to a comprehension of the hideous scene in which I was the principal actor—or at least, the *living* one—I was seized with a mortal terror: and snatching up my spade, I fled from the spot. For the remainder of that night I wandered about like one demented,—now under the influence of a stupendous horror—now giving way to the anguish of indescribable excruciations;—at one time rushing madly on as if lashed by invisible fiends wielding whips of scorpions—at another time dragging myself slowly and painfully along as if drooping and sinking beneath the weight of an intolerable burthen;—now gloating over the revenge which I had consummated—and then recoiling from the bare idea of so tremendous a monstrosity. In the morning I repaired to one of the low lodging-houses which abound in all the vile neighbourhoods and pauper districts of London: and there I rested for many hours. In the evening I heard the frequenters of the place talking of the hideous deed of sacrilege that had been committed on the previous night in Old St. Pancras Churchyard; and I learnt that the whole vicinage of the scene of my fearful exploit was

struck with consternation, horror, and disgust. Oh! then—Oh! then, how my heart bounded within me, as if a source of enjoyment at once the most savage and the most ecstatic were now open to my comprehension! I had longed,—nay, more —I had resolved to strike terror into the heart of society—to startle it with stupendous alarms—to dig the pit of hell at its very feet—to outrage all its decencies and violate all its proprieties! Such was my determination—and now I had discovered the means of carrying that resolve into execution. War, war, to the knife against that society which turns men into monsters and goads the best intentioned individuals to desperation:—war, war to the death against that society which is composed of selfishness, heartlessness, and injustice! Such was my motto: and all my veins thrilled with delight as, one after another, innumerable means of carrying on that war presented themselves to my imagination. It was the war of one poor outcast against the whole aggregate of society: but I vowed that the war should be terrible nevertheless! And the means to which I have alluded?—the ideas which suggested themselves to my brain?—that brain which hell seemed to fertilise at the moment! Oh! these means, I say, were ample—and I laughed inwardly with a savage triumph as I recapitulated them in detail! There was the desecration of the graves of the dead—there was incendiarism in the country—there was the assassination of solitary way-farers in lonely parts—there was the throwing of vitriol in the faces of passers-by—there was——"

"Enough—enough!" cried Meagles, starting from his seat: "I can hear no more!"—but almost instantaneously resuming his place, he said in a tone so altered that it showed how powerful was the effect which a second thought had produced upon his mind, "And yet I will hear you to the end. Proceed—and once more I demand your pardon for this interruption."

"Well, I will continue, then," said Melmoth, after a few moments' hesitation. "The thoughts and reflections of which I have been speaking, prepared me for the pursuance of that campaign which I had commenced in Old St. Pancras Churchyard; and I resolved to cumulate horror upon horror for the purpose of startling society. Therefore, when night again spread her sable wing over the earth, I took my spade and bent my way towards the eastern end of the metropolis. In Shoreditch Churchyard—a cemetery situated in the midst of a densely populated neighbourhood—I made my second assault upon the innocent, unconscious dead! When morning dawned a grave was found to have been violated—its tenant dragged up and horribly mangled. The outrage was incredible—it exceeded all possibility of belief. The rumour of the St. Pancras affair had reached Shoreditch, but was treated with ridicule: now the same stupendous atrocity was brought to the very doors of the sceptics and scoffers; yet they did not believe until they crowded to the churchyard and beheld with their own eyes the open grave, the shattered coffin, and the mutilated body! Then they were all stricken with an awful consternation—and they looked at each other in dumb horror, as if the plague had suddenly broken out amongst them. Oh! it was a glee—it was ecstacy—it was delirious pleasure for me! I went into the public-houses and heard the frequenters of those places talking upon the subject—their tones low and solemn: I passed down the streets and beheld ghastly amazement and blank terror depicted upon every countenance that appeared at a window or a door-way. Heavens! how my vengeance was working! I had been trodden upon as a worm—a miserable, wretched worm, whose loss from the social aggregate would not be missed, and who might therefore be safely trampled and crushed out of existence: but, behold! this worm had made itself potent enough to strike terror into the hearts of thousands! Was that no triumph?—was that no source of joy? Assuredly it was: and therefore you need not be surprised if I tell you that on the third night of my savage campaign, I sallied forth again—I betook myself to another cemetery—and St. Matthew's, Bethnal Green, became the theatre of my hellish revelry. Oh! then and there I rollicked like a fiend in my unholy pastime—and I vented my rage upon the tenants of two graves! Next morning the whole district was in a state of excitement as tremendous as if the mutilated dead themselves had traversed the streets in their grave-clothes. The infection of a panic terror spread over the entire neighbourhood: men shook their heads and talked of vampyres—old women spoke of gholes and human jackals. I concealed my joy beneath a composed countenance: but in my heart I was mad, frenzied, frantic with the bliss of triumph. But as I was preparing for my fourth exploit in another quarter of the metropolis, strange and awful rumours met my ears,—how the grave-yards were to be watched with blood-hounds—how man-traps and spring-guns were to be planted—and how all possible means were to be adopted to protect the dead and discover the desecrator of their earthy homes. I was struck with consternation—my courage vanished—my ferocity received a sudden check—and all my infuriate valour became deadened into a grovelling cowardice. Society was destined, then, to have a respite? Yes: and like a troubled spirit did I wander about at night —remaining all day in some obscure den, where I used to fall into a numbness of the feeling and a stupefaction of the senses that made those around me think I had become a moping idiot. But this dulness soon passed—the fearful instinct revived once more—and notwithstanding the struggle which I made to combat against the whelming tide of abhorrent impulses, I felt that all my efforts would be in vain!"

The monster-man paused in his dreadful recital—and Meagles proffered him wine. He drank it with avidity—his eyes flamed up with brighter fires—a glow appeared upon his cheeks—and unsolicited he resumed his tale of horror.

"After the lapse of some days I grew so restless that I was compelled to go out in the broad daylight—for I found it impossible to remain in-doors. I passed by a churchyard—and, behold! a sudden curiosity prompted me to enter it. I need scarcely observe that I had not carried my spade about with me since the last time I had used it: and therefore my appearance was that of a rough, weather-beaten sailor. I did not wish to enter that churchyard—but an insuperable power urged me on. I was obeying some spell more potent than my own inclinations —some supernatural influence which had more of

the demon in its nature than I had of the angel in my heart. I entered therefore that cemetery: but scarcely had I diverged from the pathway and begun to ramble amongst the tomb-stones, when an impatient voice cried out, '*Take care of yourself: there are man-traps and spring-guns planted there!*' —This fearful warning, which reminded me of a danger that I had for the moment lost sight of, made me step back into the path-way: and, looking round, I saw a man coming out of the church-porch. He it was who had given me the warning: and, as I speedily recovered my self-possession, I judged by his appearance that he was a good-humoured kind of a person. Nor was I mistaken; and we speedily got into conversation together. He told me that he was employed to remain there during the day to see that people passing through the churchyard did not move out of the path-way, as man-traps and spring-guns had been planted in consequence of the late mysterious desecration of the graves in other cemeteries. Affecting to be a blunt, off hand, frank-speaking sailor, I soon won his confidence; and he explained to me how the spring-guns were set, with their numerous wires diverging in all directions, and how the man-traps were concealed in the grass between the graves. In fine, little suspecting that I was the monster whose hideous deeds had led to the adoption of all these precautions, the man explained everything without reserve; and, after a long conversation, I left him. During the remainder of that day I wandered about with my mind full of all I had just heard;—and the longer I reflected thereupon, the more deeply could I feel the influence of the demon winding itself as it were around my heart. Evening came—and my blood was already boiling at fever heat: a presentiment of what I was doomed that night to do arose in my mind, filling me with anguish and loathing, and making me curse the hour when I was born. I felt that I was a monomaniac—and I abhorred myself: I knew that a species of madness had overtaken me, imbuing me with appalling tendencies, but not depriving me of the faculty of deploring them. I was goaded on to insanity of action, though remaining perfectly rational in my ideas. But as the darkness of night deepened I became strangely and wildly agitated; and it seemed as if a strong hand seized upon me by the nape of the neck and impelled me onward in the particular course chalked out by an infernal destiny and against which there was no possibility of resistance. Thus was I hurried back to the den where I had been staying—and thus was I prompted to take my spade and conceal it as well as I could about my person. In like manner was I urged to a cutler's shop, where I expended my last sixpence in the purchase of a pair of scissors. Oh! truly, Mr. Meagles—truly is all this the fearful narrative of impulsive madness the most horrible—the most diabolical!"

"It is indeed, my poor friend—it is indeed!" exclaimed Meagles, who was fascinated by the appalling interest of the tale even as the bird is by the eye of the snake,—a horrible fascination whence the escape which would prove so welcome is impossible!

"But let me hasten and bring my hideous story to a conclusion," said Melmoth, with abruptness alike in voice and manner: "for I myself am getting sick of it, as I am sure you must be. Well, then, I returned to the churchyard which I had visited in the morning; and heaven knows how agonizing were the thoughts, the instincts, and the impulses which waged their tremendous warfare within my soul. Talk of the roaring, raging, conflicting billows of a whirlpool—they were naught to the battling fury of my sensations!—talk of the eddies of sand thrown up in whirling columns by the hurricane on Arabia's desert—they were nothing in comparison with my jarring inclinations! I would have given worlds to go back—but an indomitable power urged me on: I would have laid down my life to be able to turn and flee—but a destiny that knew not pity nor remorse compelled me to go forward. It seemed as if I had *two* minds—the one wherein all the better feelings of my nature had concentrated themselves: the other forming the focus of all the influences of hell!"

"And the latter triumphed?" said Meagles, in a voice that was low and subdued with mingled suspense and consternation.

"Yes—hell triumphed!" returned Melmoth, a ghastly expression sweeping over his countenance. "I entered the churchyard, though recoiling from the hideous and varied dangers which menaced me. For I knew that the spring-guns were charged ready to vomit forth death or inflict disabling wounds,—and that the steel-traps were yawning in all directions like serpents with their mouths open in the long damp grass. But hell which gave me its instincts, lent me also its cunning: and mounting upon the tomb-stones, I used them as a bridge to convey me safely over the perils that lay concealed below. Nevertheless, every sound alarmed me—filling my soul with terrors the most excruciating, as if the voice of Death were whispering upon every breeze and his foot-fall were heard in the waving of the grass. Did a dog bark in the distance, I instantaneously fancied that it was the bay of a blood-hound scenting me in my unholy work: and the tread of a passer-by in the adjoining lane was taken to be that of a pursuer. Thus was my course frequently interrupted by my fears and imaginings: but all those apprehensions proved groundless on that occasion. At last, through the faint glimmering of the moonlight, I beheld a new-made grave: and then, as the instinct of the tiger warms for blood when its prey approaches, did my soul experience its horrible longing to desecrate the earthy solitude of the dead. By the exercise of a little caution I discovered in which direction the wire of the spring-gun ran; and with the scissors I cut a piece clean out of the middle. For you must understand that the spring-gun revolves upon a swivel, and turning in the direction of the wire which is trodden upon, explodes point-blank at the trespasser: therefore, by delicately feeling for the wire and cutting a portion of it away, it became perfectly safe to tread on this particular spot whence the wire was thus removed. And now I am touching upon a sad—a mournful—a horrible episode in a narrative where all is sad, or mournful, or horrible; but you will understand how previous horrors could be outvied—so far as the magnitude of the desecration and the anguish of my soul were concerned—when I tell you that having hollowed the grave, dragged up the coffin, and torn off the lid, I beheld the marble countenance of *my own wife!*"

"Your own wife!" echoed Meagles, starting with a spasmodic shock. "This is horrible—horrible!"

"Most horrible—most horrible!" groaned Mel-

moth, now covering his countenance with his hands: and for upwards of a minute he remained in this position—silent and motionless. "I saw that it was a pauper-coffin in which she lay," he continued, at length revealing his features again — those features which were now so hideous in their pallor, so ghastly in their expression of mingled anguish and horror: "and it was not difficult to conjecture how she had died, or how her remains had found the rites of sepulture. Misery and starvation had done the former—the cold charity of the parish had done the latter. But I will not dwell upon the churchyard scene of that dreadful night. Suffice it to say that once more did the curse rise up from the depths of my soul—that curse which had sprung into existence when I found that my family had been turned adrift on the wide world: yes—this fearful curse did I now renew—adopt again—and swear to carry out to the best of my ability! I sought to steel my soul against all pity and all remorse: my wife was murdered by the cruel laws and institutions of which I had been first made the victim—and a terrible retaliation could alone appease my thirst for vengeance. Vengeance, then, would I have! Need I tell you that I restored the remains of my poor wife to their last resting-place—and that I repeated over her grave the oath I had sworn to avenge her? Then I quitted the churchyard; and at a short distance I met a well dressed man dragging himself along in a state of almost helpless intoxication. I recollected that I had no money left—and I robbed him of the little money which he had about him. He was too powerless to offer resistance—and I did not hurt him. But I hurried away, rejoicing in this new crime: for I saw that it was useless for an outcast wretch such as I to endeavour even to be good. Nevertheless, when the excitement of these exploits began to wear away and the inevitable influence of reaction came, I once more cursed the destiny which branded me like a second Cain; and I would have given worlds, had I possessed them, to undo the deed of the robbery. But remorse was useless and unavailing: and, behold! in a few days the infernal hallucination came back again—and in the depth of the night to another churchyard did I wend my way. Once more did I pass through the hideous ordeal of a frightful conflict with all my better feelings—and once more did the infuriate demon that was within me, triumph over the last efforts of my guardian genius to save me. The wire of the spring-gun was found and cut, as on the former occasion—a grave was opened—a corse was torn up—and, inspired with a diabolical rage and a demoniac fury, I hacked and hewed it with the shovel. Then I fell into a stupor, which lasted for two or three hours—I know not exactly how long; and on starting up, I was seized with a horror so profound—an anguish so intense—a panic so insuperable, that, forgetful of the dangers which environed me, I turned to flee from the scene of my atrocious pastime. Yes—I turned and fled: but in a moment there was an explosion—I had trodden upon the wire whence I had previously cut a portion away—and my body received the contents of the accursed spring-gun. O horror! what were my feelings at that moment! Ten million harrowing thoughts flashed through my brain swiftly as a flight of arrows cleaves the air,—thoughts of capture, trial, condemnation, and death upon the scaffold! But the next instant I shook myself like a dog on emerging from the water—and though in every part of my body I experienced the tortures of the damned, I found that I was not completely disabled. Dragging myself from the grass into the pathway, I stopped for a few moments to bind up the only wound that was bleeding very seriously;—and then, with a celerity that was marvellous considering the shocking state I was in, I rushed from the scene of my crime and its punishment. An alarm was already raised in the neighbourhood by the explosion of the gun: but I got off in safety—and as the pain caused by my wounds was presently succeeded by a strange numbness all over my frame, I was enabled to drag myself along through the bye-streets into which I had entered. It was in the north-western suburbs of London that my exploit of this memorable night had taken place: and I bent my way toward the eastern districts. In fine, at the expiration of about three hours I entered the maze of wretched streets, filthy alleys, and vile courts which constitute Whitechapel; and, almost perishing with exhaustion, I sank down on the door-step of a large building which looked gloomy as a prison in the obscurity of the night. It proved to be the workhouse—and when the door opened, I demanded admission. This was granted when it was understood that I had been severely wounded,—and to account for which I invented some tale. But, behold! it was destined by providence that beneath the roof of the pauper asylum I should meet my own children, whom necessity had rendered inmates there."

"In the workhouse?" exclaimed Meagles, more and more interested in the strange, wild, and scarcely credible narrative to which he was listening.

"Yes—in the workhouse—the panper's home!" returned Melmoth bitterly. "But I was rejoiced to meet them anywhere, poor things!—for their mother had been taken from them by the hand of Death. And then I learnt that the babe was also dead—and that a surgeon had taken the infant's corpse, doubtless to preserve it in his pharmacy: and I vowed in my soul that the barbarian should not go unpunished. I learnt also that my poor wife had breathed her last on the steps of a great mansion at the West End: and I made another vow, to the effect that the inmates of the lordly dwelling should likewise be marked out as the objects of my future vengeance. To be brief, the very surgeon who took my dead child, was one day brought by the parish doctor to see me at the workhouse; and the nature and number of my wounds led to the discovery that I was the monster whose deeds had so lately stricken the entire community with horror. I was removed to a mad-cell and treated as a maniac of the most desperate class. But a revolt of my fellow-lunatics led to my emancipation: and, accompanied by my children, I quitted the workhouse in safety. Nearly six weeks have elapsed since then——"

"And in the interval you have exercised a proper control over your feelings and your actions?" said Meagles, with an eagerness which showed how rejoiced he would be at receiving an affirmative response: for amidst all the horror and loathing which he experienced for the unhappy wretch, there was blended a deep compassion—an immense pity!

"Since that period," said Melmoth, after a long pause and in a solemn tone, while he fixed his eyes with a strange expression of dogged resolution and desperate decision upon Meagles,—"since that period I have certainly experienced no return of the horrible mania—the frightful hallucination—which urged me on to the fury of a ghole and the atrocities of a vampyre: but I still continue my warfare against the world! You observe that my appearance denotes not penury: and yet I labour not honestly to procure raiment, food, and lodging for myself and children. No—there is not a chance for honest industry in this country! I have consequently become a thief—a professional thief—and I am training my children to be thieves——"

"Good God! is this possible, Melmoth?" exclaimed Tim Meagles, profoundly excited.

"To be sure it is!" cried the unhappy man, endeavouring to smother all compunction beneath a forced and ferocious glee. "And why not? Of what use is virtue?—what recommendation is character? None at all! And do you forget that *our* acquaintance first began by means of robbery? Did I not plunder you in St. James's Square?"

"Yes—and how deeply you regretted the action afterwards," said Meagles, in an earnest tone.

"Because you were a good man—and because I was only young in the ways of crime *then*," responded Melmoth. "But *now* I am as inveterately bent upon a career of what the world calls wrong, and plunder, and spoliation, and violence, as I once was resolute in maintaining my character pure and my name spotless. "In sooth," he exclaimed, rising abruptly from his seat,—"I have a mission to fulfil—a destiny to accomplish;—and when once all my work is done, I care not how soon I leave this earthly scene of wretchedness and trouble. I am now—yes, even *now* preparing for a grand campaign—and you will speedily hear of the enactment of dreadful deeds. There is the surgeon who stole the corpse of my child—there are the inmates of the West End house on the threshold of which my wife sank down and died—and there is the Prince whose tyranny first of all tore me away from my family—there are all these, I say, to punish;—and none of them will I spare!"

The man spoke with a terrible concentration of bitterness: and for a few moments he paused as he bent his eyes fixedly upon Meagles.

"My good friend," said Tim, in an imploring tone, "you ——"

"Nothing you can urge, Mr. Meagles," interrupted Melmoth, calmly but firmly, "will induce me to deviate from my purpose. But with regard to yourself,—with regard also to that angel of beauty and innocence, Rose Foster,—may heaven bless you both!—may God save each of you from such miseries as I have known and such torturing thoughts as I have experienced!"

With these words Melmoth rushed abruptly to the door and sped from the room. Meagles, starting from his seat, sprang after him, and implored him to remain a few minutes longer. But the monster-man, heeding him not, hastened precipitately down the stairs;—and just at the moment that Meagles reached the threshold of the door opening into the street, the unhappy being disappeared round the corner of a narrow lane on the opposite side of the Edgeware Road.

CHAPTER CCXXI.

THE EARL'S LAST ACT OF REPARATION.

On the same day and at about the same hour when the preceding incidents occurred, an event of a most serious nature took place at Stamford Manor in the vicinage of Aylesbury.

The weather was remarkably fine—indeed it was the most splendid day which had yet gladdened the Spring of 1795. All around the Manor the scenery was beautiful beyond description, exhibiting every diversity of floral colouring in the gardens, and every varied shade of green in the fields. There were the bright meadows of emerald hue—and there were the woodlands of a deeper tinge: while the dark hedges stretched out their tracery like veins upon the ample surface of the sunny pasture lands. There, like a broad riband of glittering silver, meandered the pellucid stream; and the fields, densely studded with butteroups, appeared like a green carpet all shining with an embroidery of gold. The feathered choristers filled the warm sunny air with their tuneful notes: the lambs frisked in the meadows;—and all nature, animate or inanimate, was full of cheerfulness, freshness, and beauty.

In the gardens of Stamford Manor the Earl and Countess of Desborough were walking. They were not arm-in-arm: but side by side did they slowly thread the bright gravel-paths that were bordered by beds of shining foliage and by parterres of flowers.

Nor did they look at each other: but their eyes were bent downward—and everything denoted a painful reserve and constraint which hung most oppressively about the manner, the regards, the demeanour, and the very gait and gestures of both. Yet no quarrel had taken place between them—no dispute had occurred to ruffle their temper or produce a misunderstanding. Not a hasty word had fallen from either lip—not an angry look had been exchanged: nothing, in fact, had transpired of an irritable or unpleasant nature between them in their relative capacity of man and wife. Neither was the lady now tortured by unsatisfied desires and tantalising passions—nor the nobleman shamed and goaded by a sense of humiliation and despair on that account. No: far different thoughts racked their brains and agitated their souls!

The truth was that they experienced a secret and insuperable loathing for each other,—a mingled disgust and horror against which they vainly strove, but which proved stronger than themselves: for the taint of an atmosphere poisoned by the sanguine exhalation of murder had destroyed all possible sympathy in their hearts! Deeply, fondly, madly, devotedly as the Earl had loved his beautiful Countess, he now regarded her as a murderess;—and her presence, even as she walked in all the glory of her loveliness, produced upon him a shuddering sensation as if a loathsome serpent, with a charming woman's head, were in reality concealed beneath that rustling silk and that snowy linen. It seemed to him as if there were pollution in her very touch—venom in her breath—the baleful fascination of a basilisk in her looks;—and a cold tremor, like a presentiment of coming danger was wont to creep slowly over him whenever she

approached him. Ah! how different were his feelings now from what they were when he used to worship the very ground upon which she trod—when he was never wearied of gazing upon her as the goddess of his idolatry—and when her touch thrilled him with ecstacy and her beaming looks transfixed him with delight! But as an ungenial rain showers down myriads of poisonous insects upon the germinating plants and the nascent flowers of Spring,—so had murder sprinkled its crimson drops upon all the brightest feelings and purest affections that had ever flourished in the heart of that nobleman;—and as a blight suddenly falls upon the loveliest blossoms and the greenest leaves, turning the delicate beauty of the former into cankered rottenness and the verdure of the latter into discoloured sereness,—so had crime shed its corroding, blasting mildew upon the holiest sentiments and the finest emotions that ever harboured in the mortal breast.

On the other hand, if with the Countess of Desborough there were not the same fervid love to be crushed—the same enthusiastic affections to be blighted—and the same worship to be overthrown, there was at all events an equal amount of sensibility to be shocked and a similar delicacy to be hurt: and when Eleanor thought of her husband or beheld him approach her, she could only regard him as her accomplice in a murder! The very circumstance that he possessed all the grandest mental qualities which could inspire admiration,—that his principles were the most noble and the most exalted which could possibly ensure respect,—and that his public character as a man was the most elevated and the most enviable that could exist,—the knowledge of all this, we say, only increased the horror and augmented the disgust wherewith the Countess now regarded him. For to her contemplation the mask was torn from his countenance: she saw him *as he was*, her accomplice in a murder—and not *as he seemed to the world*, a stainless man. Although it was her hand which had perpetrated the deed, and he was merely an accessary before and after the fact, yet was not his share of the deed absorbed in the consciousness of her own transcendently superior iniquity: nor did that very chivalrous nature on his part which had led him thus to become her accomplice,—nor did an appreciation of such boundless love, we say, have any effect in neutralising or diminishing the disgust and horror which she felt towards the partner in her crime *after* that crime was accomplished.

Thus was it that the noble couple experienced a mutual loathing and abhorrence; and inasmuch as they could not possibly conquer or mitigate these feelings, so neither could they conceal them from each other. Restraint and embarrassment, coldness and reserve rapidly infused themselves into their manners—their looks—their language: so that they became afraid to exchange a glance—afraid to be left alone together—afraid to allow their very hands to come in contact!

On the present occasion they had met by accident in the garden—neither being previously aware that the other was walking in the charming enclosure at the time. And on thus meeting they had started as if each one had come suddenly face to face with a horrible spectre: then, instantaneously dropping their looks, they had proceeded together side by side along the gravel-walk, exchanging a few commonplace observations to which they gave utterance with an effort and the cold meaningless nature of which only rendered their embarrassment the more cruel—their perplexity the more painful.

"Eleanor," said the Earl, after a long pause the chill silence of which became intolerable,—"there must be an end to all this!"

"My lord!" ejaculated the Countess, with a start, as if she did not comprehend her husband's meaning: and the hurried glance which she threw upon him was instantaneously averted.

"Yes—all this must have an end some how or another," cried the Earl, in a voice of decision: "it is impossible that we can lead such a terrible existence much longer."

"A terrible existence, my lord?" said the Countess, with a sort of cold astonishment.

"Oh! do not affect inability to comprehend me, Eleanor!" exclaimed the unhappy nobleman: "your heart tells you but too well what I mean. Look you, Eleanor—we are accursed in each other's eyes," he continued, in a low, deep, hollow tone; "and until this moment we have not dared confess in words those feelings which nevertheless speak out in all our looks and all our actions. Crime, Eleanor, has opened a tremendous gulf between us—and we are not fitted to dwell together any longer."

"But if we separate," said the Countess, hanging down her head and speaking in a tone that was scarcely audible,—for she no longer affected not to comprehend her husband's meaning,—"if we separate, what will the world say?—what scandal will be created?—what suspicions may be engendered?"

"True!" murmured the Earl. "And therefore it is apparent that we must not separate—eh?" he said inquiringly.

"No—we must not separate," responded the Countess.

"Nor can we continue to live together thus!" added the Earl.

"No—we cannot live together thus," she rejoined.

And a long pause ensued, during which they walked slowly towards the house, not once glancing at each other—no, not even furtively.

"'Tis a heavenly day—a glorious day," suddenly exclaimed the Earl, as if all in a moment inspired by a joyousness arising from a sense of the beauties and glories of Nature. "The prospect from the roof of the building must be charming to a degree. Methinks that our hearts, Eleanor, may derive a balm from the contemplation of the rich and varied banquet which the hand of Spring has spread out on nature's table to feast the eye;—and it may be also that from the harmonious blending of such varied shades, and tints, and hues, our minds may glean a lesson teaching us how to smooth off the asperities of our own feelings and lead them to commingle in friendly unison."

The Countess threw a look of amazement, curiosity, and doubt upon her husband,—the longest and most earnest look which she had dared to fix upon him ever since the murder. At first she wondered what he meant by devoting his thoughts to the beauties of nature when the stern realities of the world were pregnant with so fearfully absorbing an interest for him as well as for herself: then she was seized with an anxiety to discover at what aim his re-

mark were tending;—and lastly she was plunged into a strange uncertainty as to whether he had some sinister meaning, or whether he had spoken frankly and ingenuously under the influence of an improving tone of mind.

"Do you wish to ascend to the roof of the mansion?" she asked, as her regards were once more averted.

"If you be agreeable, Eleanor," answered the Earl. "Indeed I should wish you to accompany me—for I have an idea that some good will result from the prospect that will greet your eyes on that eminence."

"Be it so, then," observed the Countess: and, with feelings vaguely alarming, though full of uncertainty, suspense, and curiosity, she began the ascent of a winding staircase which led to the roof of the mansion.

The Earl followed her;—and during the three or four minutes occupied in the task of toiling up the flight, he continued to discourse with a cheerfulness that raised Eleanor's wonder to the highest pitch and augmented her doubts to a positive terror.

"When the mind is fevered," said the Earl, "any change of scene, however trivial—any departure, however slight, from the ordinary routine, is productive of incalculable benefit. I long to breathe a fresher and purer air upon an eminence: the atmosphere was stifling in the garden below. Besides, we shall obtain a view of a range of scenery far wider than the mere landscape which is seen from the railings of our own grounds. And then, too, it seems, my Eleanor, as if we were entering upon a new footing towards each other and resolving upon the adoption of a more pleasant demeanour, by thus seeking this little change of scene together. Can you bring yourself to view it in the same light?"

But the Countess was too much a prey to her increasing wonderment and growing fears to be ab-

to vouchsafe any reply to that question: and in a few moments she emerged upon the leads on the summit of Stamford Manor. There was a low parapet which ran along the edge,—but so very low that it was dangerous for a person at all prone to giddiness to venture too near.

"Is not this a charming prospect, Eleanor?" exclaimed the Earl, stretching forth his arm and sweeping it slowly around as if to fix her attention upon the scenery. "But the finest view may be obtained from this point——"

And he advanced nearer to the parapet as he spoke.

"For heaven's sake be cautious, Francis!" cried Eleanor, shrinking back in the dismay which suddenly blanched her cheeks and rendered her voice tremulous.

"Is it possible, Eleanor," said the Earl, turning abruptly round and fixing his eyes full upon her,—yes, full upon her for the first time during this scene which we are describing,—"is it possible that you can entertain any apprehension for *me?*"

"Do you doubt it?" cried the Countess, returning that gaze—but gazing in mingled curiosity and alarm. "Oh! if you have brought me up here to test my feelings towards you——But, no—you would not do that," she exclaimed, her manner suddenly becoming all perplexity: then, as it merged with equal rapidity into the most poignant alarm, she said, "How strangely you regard me!—your looks fill me with vague terrors! O Francis, surely you do not intend to injure——"

"To injure *you!*" ejaculated the Earl, in a voice which immediately reassured her: and the ghastly, horrified, shuddering look which she had for a moment flung towards the abyss below, was once more bent upon her husband. "God forbid that I should hurt a hair of your head! No, no," he continued, with a wild excitement which had something of the painful joyousness and martyrised enthusiasm of self-devotion in its tone and manner,—"I would not live to make you miserable, my Eleanor—but I would die to ensure your happiness!"

"Just heavens! what mean you, Francis?" shrieked forth his wife, a strange and fearful suspicion flashing to her brain: and the perspiration started out in bead-like drops from her brow.

"Eleanor," said the nobleman, taking her hand—that hand which was not withdrawn,—and at the same time he gazed steadfastly upon her, with a desperate determination written on all his features,—"Eleanor, this is the first occasion on which we have been enabled to look each other in the face without horror, and to touch each other without loathing, since that fatal evening——"

"Yes, yes—I comprehend you, Francis," interrupted the noble lady, with a wild impatience. "But what thought—what purpose is now uppermost in your mind? Speak, I conjure you! Leave me not in doubt, I implore you!" and in the agony of intolerable suspense, she laid the hand that was disengaged upon her panting bosom as if to still the painful throbbings of the heart that beat within.

"I will explain myself in a few words, Eleanor," said the Earl, all the recent animation of his countenance being now lost in an expression of mournful and despairing resolution. "You have already assented to the proposition that we cannot live together any longer—and you have likewise declared that it would be imprudent for us to separate. In these opinions I coincide with you—and therefore neither alternative is open to us! But is there no other course left?—is there no remedy for the sad position in which we are relatively placed? We are now gazing upon each other without aversion: but it is only because feelings of a nature still more potent have arisen to supersede for the instant that mutual abhorrence and distrust which never can be annihilated altogether. No—that chilling reserve, that sullen formality, and that cold embarrassment will all come back again;—and so soon as the present excitement has evaporated, we shall once more shun each other's glance and dread each other's touch!"

"'Tis true—my God! too true!" murmured Eleanor, in a voice of smothered bitterness and agony.

"Oh! then a sacrifice must be made by one that the other may be happy," said the Earl, hastily. "And inasmuch as I have been thine evil genius, Eleanor,—inasmuch as I drew thee into a marriage which thou hast been fated to deplore from the very first,—oh! on account of all this, I will endeavour—now—at last—to make thee a signal reparation! Be happy, Eleanor—may God forgive and bless thee——"

"What mean you?" gasped the horror-stricken lady, her large dark eyes gazing upon him in ghastly consternation.

"You will make the world believe it was an accident, Eleanor," said the nobleman: then, dropping her hand after pressing it fervidly for an instant, he threw himself over the parapet.

A scream—a piercing, rending scream of anguish thrilled from the lips of Lady Desborough: and the next moment she grew rigid—transfixed to the spot with an appalling consternation,—her eyes dilated—her lips apart—her cheeks perfectly blanched—and her whole attitude that of agonised terror.

The gardeners, who were working on the grounds at the front of the house, beheld the tragedy and hurried to the place where the nobleman fell: but his head was frightfully shattered—and life was extinct! The servants rushed up to the roof to take charge of their mistress, whom they bore, raving with delirium, to her own chamber;—and the tidings of the *fatal accident* which had occurred to Lord Desborough soon spread like wild-fire throughout the neighbourhood.

CHAPTER CCXXII.

OCCURRENCES IN NEWGATE.

The scene changes from Stamford Manor to the gloomy gaol of Newgate: but the day is still the same on which the preceding incidents took place.

It was shortly after the hour of noon; and Caroline Walters was taking exercise in the low-arched, stone-paved hall, whence the door opened into several of the felons' yards. We have already stated that the discipline of Newgate was by no

means strict at the period whereof we are writing and that money could purchase many indulgences: hence the privilege which the young woman had obtained of walking in that hall, instead of being confined to the yard allotted to female criminals.

It was now the dinner-hour. Those prisoners who received the gaol allowance, had their rations duly served out to them; while those who were able to maintain themselves were gathered at the gratings round the doors of the yard, in eager expectation of the arrival of their provender from outside. This was brought either by the waiters of the taverns and coffee-houses in the Old Bailey, or else by the friends of the prisoners;—and during the ten minutes that the process of bringing the various dinners lasted, the hall where Caroline was walking was full of bustle and animation.

She stood to watch the scene: and as the doors communicating with the yard now stood open, she was enabled to observe the countenances of the men who thronged around the iron gratings which interposed their barrier between the prisoners in those yards and the visitors, waiters, or friends who came by way of the hall. And many villanous, ill-looking, hideous faces did Caroline now behold,—faces every line and lineament of which bespoke whole catalogues of misdeeds:—but there were two countenances which struck her as being more deeply stamped with crime and more darkly indicative of human infamy, than all the rest. Indeed, it was with a cold shudder that she gazed upon those two individuals who had thus particularly attracted her notice, and who were evidently waiting with a surly impatience for the arrival of their dinner.

The friendly turnkey, of whom Caroline purchased the various privileges and indulgences which she enjoyed, was lounging at one end of the hall, keeping watch upon those persons who were now entering the prison: and the impulse of curiosity led her to accost him with an inquiry relative to the two ill-looking fellows who had so especially engaged her attention.

"Who are they, Miss?" ejaculated the turnkey, repeating the query which she had put to him: "why, the most notoriousest scoundrels in all Europe! That fellow with the savage look is called the Magsman—though his proper name is Joe Warren: t'other chap is called the Big Beggarman—though his real name is Stephen Price. They're going to be tried by the Admiralty Court for piracy, murder, and God knows what all. That fellow the Magsman once escaped out of this gaol in a most extraordinary fashion——But see how savage he and his pal look because their dinner hasn't come yet. They're the only two men waiting at the iron bars—and won't Carrotty Poll catch it when she comes?"

"Who is the female you have named?" inquired Miss Walters.

"The Big Beggarman's daughter," responded the turnkey. "She always—or nearly always comes herself with the dinner——"

"I suppose she lives hard by, then?"

"Not at all, Miss. She keeps a low public at Horsly-down: but she generally comes up to see her father and his pal at mid-day, and so she brings in their dinner with her. Lord bless ye, Miss! there's no want of money in that quarter—and you'll presently see her come with a devilish nice dinner for those rascals—a pair of fowls with broiled ham, may be—or a pigeon pie——But here she is!"

"Good morning, Mr. Pigman," said Carrotty Poll, bestowing this passing compliment upon the turnkey as she entered the hall at the moment: then, hurrying towards the grating, she deposited on the ground the heavy basket which she had brought with her.

"Now, Miss," said the turnkey, in a hurried whisper, to Caroline Walters, "if you want to hear Carrotty Poll catch it, you'll just creep behind that stone pillar—and I'm blowed if you won't be amused."

An unaccountable impulse urged the young woman to adopt the hint which Mr. Pigman thus gave her in a jocular mood;—and advancing down the hall, she turned aside mid-way and posted herself behind the massive stone pillar that was nearest to the particular grating where the expected colloquy was to take place.

"Well, Poll," said the Big Beggarman, gruffly, "what the devil has made you so late—eh?"

"Because I've been making inquiries about the matter you told me of yesterday—and that's why," answered the red-haired young woman in her sharp vixenish voice.

"And what's the result, gal?" demanded her father.

"Why, I've found the queer Christian name in one of the fashionable books that contain all the noble and great families of the country," answered Carrotty Poll.

"Well—and who owns the name?" asked the Magsman. "Lord! how long the gal is giving us an explanation!"

"Because I'm out of breath with running on account of being so late, and also with lugging this heavy basket along from the tavern over the way. But if you'll give me time I'll tell you all about it."

"Go on," said the Magsman and the Beggarman, both as it were in the same breath.

"In the first place, then," continued Carrotty Poll, "I took with me the lad Alfred that I've spoken to you about—the same who did the business for Lord Florimel up at Rigden's——"

"Yes, yes—we know what you mean," exclaimed the Magsman: "you've told us all about that business already. By the bye, I suppose Florimel paid you devilish handsome for getting him back his papers from Rigden——"

"Five hundred guineas for that business, and a couple of hundred for saving Pauline Clarendon from the power of the Prince—seven hundred in all," said Carrotty Poll, with a chuckle: "and so that's a pretty little sum to add to what we had already mustered up to help us on in the world when we emigrate."

"To be sure," said the Magsman, with a chuckle: "and we musn't forget that my dear delectable wife, Mrs. Brace, as she chooses to call herself, contributed a thousand pounds t'other day towards that sum. It was lucky she was made to shell out in that manner just before she got lumbered for the murders. Who the devil would ever have thought that she had pluck enough to do such things? And isn't it odd that we should both be in lavender at the same time—she in one yard, and me in another? I wonder whether she ever in-

quires after me," added the Magsman, with a coarse laugh.

"Oh! we ain't talking about your splendid wife now, Mr. Warren," said Carrotty Poll, with vixenish petulence. "I was going to observe, when you interrupted me, that there's no harm in increasing our funds as much as possible: and indeed this was the very self-same remark which you made yesterday when you and father told me for the first time all the curious details about your adventures down in the country three months ago. Perhaps the clue which I have already succeeded in obtaining, in pursuance of all you thus told me, will enable me to push the investigation to the end."

"And if you should find out the parties who were engaged in those adventures in the country," said the Magsman, "it may be worth many thousand pounds to us. I told your father so at the time—didn't I, Stephen?"

"You did, Joe," was the answer. "And let me see—the three distinct clues which we had, were the lady's queer Christian name—the signet-ring taken off the finger of the dead body in the vault—and the fact that the old woman at the last cottage we stopped at, called our masked employer '*my lord*.' Those are the three clues—and the only three that we possess——"

"Well, but I think that they will prove sufficient, at least to put us upon the right track towards discovering the whole mystery," interrupted Carrotty Poll. "But as I was telling you just now, I took Alfred with me to a bookseller's at the West End—and under pretence of buying the fashionable guides, he looked over them well. He found the name of *Fernanda;*—and it seems that the lady who bears it is a young one—her surname is *Aylmer*—and she is related to the Earl of Desborough, the Earl of Montgomery, the Marchioness of Bellenden, and other noble personages. Other inquiries which I afterwards made, led to the information that this Fernanda Aylmer is now Lady Holderness: and from what I have gleamed of her personal appearance, her hair is of a dark glossy brown—her eyes a deep blue—her complexion is brilliantly fair——"

"Just the description of the masked lady of our adventure so far as we could catch a glimpse of her features at all," exclaimed the Magsman. "There can be no doubt that you have hit upon the right Fernanda, Poll: besides, the name is so very uncommon——"

"And more than that," interrupted the red-haired young woman, "the crest on the signet-ring which you gave me is that of the Bellenden family, to which Lady Holderness is related."

"Ah! now we are indeed getting into the right track," said the Magsman. "What do you think, Stephen, if Poll was to go straight to Lady Holderness's house—demand an interview with her—accuse her point blank of being the lady who enticed the young gentleman from the farm-house, and whose name he called out in his anguish just before we threw him into the hollow buttress of the bridge——"

"No—no," interrupted the Big Beggarman; "we musn't adopt any plan without mature consideration. I don't approve of Poll's going on a mere hap-hazard adventure to Lady Holderness——"

"Well, let us think over it until to-morrow, Stephen," said the Magsman. "At all events I feel pretty sure we're upon the right track to unravel the mystery of the murder at the bridge, the shifting of the coffin-plates in the vault, and the altering of the register in the vestry. I really can't help recapitulating all those incidents—they were so very singular!"

"I was told this morning," said Poll, "that Lady Holderness is engaged with her cousin Lord Montgomery in carrying on a law-suit against that same Lady Bellenden whose crest is on the signet-ring. The suit is all about the family estates of the Bellendens in Warwickshire——"

"And who can tell but that the forgery committed by the masked lord in the vestry was somehow or another connected with this law-suit?" exclaimed the Big Beggarman.

"And also the substituting of a new coffin-plate for an old one?" added the Magsman. "Perhaps the young fellow that was murdered too, might have been interested in the case——"

"And so after all it's as likely as not that the lord who employed us and who played us such a scurvy trick about our embarkation for America, was the Montgomery of whom Poll has been talking," said the Beggarman.

"Well, I think it's likely. But Poll must go and make farther inquiries this afternoon," observed Joe Warren. "And now my dear," he continued, addressing himself direct to the red-haired young woman, "tell us what you have brought for our dinner—for I should think it must have got cold while we have been chattering here."

"It's a cold veal pie, Mr. Warren—and so there's no harm done," said Poll. "A cold veal pie, with lots of hard-boiled eggs in it and nice seasoning, and a capital salad with mixture, won't prove amiss perhaps."

"Provided there's enough of the bingo to wash it down, gal," said the Beggarman.

"Well, there's a bottle of brandy," she replied: "and now, if you will hold out your hands, I'll pass the things through the wicket."

Caroline Walters perceived that the conversation between the two ruffians and the red-haired young woman had taken leave of the topics which had so unexpectedly and so strangely proved interesting to herself: and retiring from behind the pillar, she walked slowly towards the end of the hall, meditating upon what she had just heard.

Our readers will be pleased to recollect that when Caroline Walters, disguised as Rao the East Indian page, was in the service of Lord Florimel, she one evening called at the mansion of Lord Montgomery in Grafton Street. On that occasion her interview with the Earl was interrupted by the arrival of Mr. Rigden; and she was desired to step into an adjacent room while the nobleman received his professional adviser. The conversation turned partially upon the law suit which the Montgomerys were waging against the Bellendens; and the names of Fernanda and Lord Raymond were incidentally mentioned during the discourse. Not a single word of all which passed on that occasion between Eugene Montgomery and Mr. Rigden was lost upon Caroline: she listened with the deepest attention, although she did affect to start up from a nap and rub her eyes drowsily when the Earl opened the door to tell her that the attorney had taken his departure.

Thus was it that Caroline had already obtained an insight into the particulars of the law-suit: and now,

after the discourse which she had overheard between the Magsman, the Big Beggerman, and Carrotty Poll, she had no difficulty in arriving at the same conclusions to which indeed those individuals also came—namely, that the Earl of Montgomery and Fernanda were the employers of the two men in their country excursion, that Lord Raymond was the victim at the bridge, and that the proceedings in the vault and in the vestry of the church bore reference to the pending Chancery suit.

All these details were of importance to Caroline,—not only to aid her in wreaking the fullest measure of vengeance upon Fernanda, but likewise to convince the world that the young lady was capable of the blackest turpitude which could possibly be imputed to her. But if her eaves-dropping behind the pillar had made her acquainted on the one hand with particulars thus useful and important to her purposes, it had nevertheless on the other hand brought to her knowledge a fact which filled her heart with rage. This was the stratagem which had been adopted, through the agency of Alfred, to recover the stolen deeds from Mr. Rigden, and restore them to Lord Florimel,—and when Caroline thus found that the mistrust with which that sickly-looking lad had inspired her at the lawyer's office, was fully warranted, she bit her lip with rage and cursed the want of caution which on Rigden's part had thus enabled Florimel to triumph in the long run.

After walking to and fro in the hall for a few minutes to collect her ideas and compose her excited feelings as well as she was able, Caroline Walters retired to her cell, where she penned the following note to Mr. Rigden:—

"The boy Alfred who stole the papers, was employed by a woman belonging to an infamous gang some of whom are at this moment in Newgate. The woman's name is Price; and she keeps a low public-house in Horsleydown. Perhaps you can find some means of avenging yourself on the wretches for the loss of the papers?"

Having sealed and addressed this letter, Caroline sent it to the post by the friendly turnkey, who rejoiced in the name of Pigman: and when this functionary returned after executing the commission, she besought him to grant her an immediate interview with the Honourable Mr. Eaton.

This favour was accorded without much difficulty; and Caroline, upon finding herself alone with Arthur, proceeded to relate all that she had learnt within the last hour relative to Fernanda, as well as all that her own suspicions or conjectures furnished in addition. Arthur took down in writing everything that was thus detailed; and after a long interview Caroline was warned by the appearance of the turnkey that it was necessary to take leave of the young gentleman. They accordingly separated; and Miss Walters was returning to her own cell in company with Mr. Pigman, when just as they entered the stone corridor leading thereto, she found herself face to face with the milliner of Pall Mall.

It must here be mentioned that Mrs. Brace had purchased leave and license to take exercise in the stone hall, in the same way as Caroline Walters; and she was proceeding thither, followed by a turnkey at some distance, when she thus encountered the young girl.

"Ah! I am glad that I have met thee, foul procuress!" said Caroline, in a voice of smothered passion. "Thou wilt go to the scaffold—and it is I who am the means of sending thee thither!"

"Traitress! thou also shalt hang to the gibbet," retorted the milliner, her eyes glancing with an infernal rage and her white lips quivering nervously. "'Twas I who informed against thee, as thou didst against me!"

"Ah! but I shall not hang, thou she-devil," returned Caroline, in a voice of malignant triumph and savage taunting; "for I can prove mine innocence—and that is more than thou canst do!"

"Wretch! thou shalt die by some means, if not by the executioner," rejoined Mrs. Brace, her whole form trembling with the demoniac passion that made her contenance white and ghastly and her features distorted and hideous.

"I shall live to gloat over thy writhings and convulsions on the scaffold, base procuress!" returned Caroline, the words hissing from between her lips as if laden with the venom of the serpent.

"Little harlot, who murdered Mrs. Lindley!" muttered the milliner between her set teeth.

"Wife of the Magsman, Joe Warren," cried Caroline, in a tone of bitter contempt and cutting scorn: "your husband was talking of you ere now!"

"Ah! would'st thou push me to extremes?" said the milliner, in a thick voice: and at the same moment she drew from her person something which flashed brightly across the eyes of Caroline Walters.

"Murderess!" ejaculated the girl, recoiling in dismay from the blow which she saw coming: but the next instant a long sharp-pointed pair of scissors which the milliner wielded, was plunged deep into Caroline's bosom.

With a low moan she sank at the feet of the infuriate Mrs. Brace, who was instantaneously seized upon by the turnkey that happened to be nearest at the moment; and while the vindictive woman was dragged away to her gloomy cell, the wounded girl was conveyed with all possible care to the prison-infirmary.

CHAPTER CCXXIII.

THE DEATH BED.

It was late in the evening of the memorable day of which we have been writing, that the chaplain of Newgate called at the mansion of Lord Florimel in Piccadilly; and, on obtaining an audience of the young noble, the reverend gentleman informed him in a few hasty but impressive words that Caroline Walters, mortally wounded and at the point of death, implored a last interview with his lordship. The naturally generous-hearted Gabriel was not the man to refuse such a prayer;—and he at once agreed to accompany the chaplain to Newgate. On their way thither the reverend gentleman informed Lord Florimel that the blow which had stretched the unfortunate young woman upon the bed of death, was dealt by Mrs. Brace; and the young patrician experienced a kind of dismay as he reflected upon the intimacy which had once subsisted between himself and the wretched milliner.

On arriving at Newgate, Lord Florimel was conducted into a chamber belonging to the infirmary-

department; and there, upon a humble pallet, lay Caroline Walters. The signs of death were already imprinted on her countenance, from which the vital colouring had entirely fled: a dimness was visible in the pupils of her eyes—her lips were almost bloodless—and her whole appearance was marked with an air of langour, weakness, and depression.

A pang of remorse shot through the heart of Lord Florimel as he entered that infirmary-chamber: for his conscience told him that his perfidy had in the beginning led the young girl astray from that path which she might have pursued innocently and happily, and placed her in the course which was thus destined to terminate violently and prematurely.

On the other hand, an expression of penitence and reviving affection appeared upon the countenance of the dying girl as Florimel, with an air of contrition and grief, approached the bed whereon she lay:—and he perceived at once that it was not to upbraid him with her last breath that Caroline had sent to beseech his presence there. The chaplain who introduced the young nobleman to the chamber, and the nurse who was in attendance upon Caroline, now withdrew; and Lord Florimel remained alone with the dying girl.

He glanced uneasily around the room, which a single candle lighted: it was naked, dull and cheerless in aspect—and a cold shudder passed over his form at the idea of any one's last moments being expended there. Then having thus slowly made the circuit of the chamber with its dingy walls and scanty furniture, his looks settled upon the countenance of Caroline Walters—and he saw that her gaze was fixed earnestly and intently upon him. In that gaze there was a professed mournfulness mingled with a certain tenderness which appeared to deprecate all angry feeling;—and stretching out her hand towards the young nobleman, she said in a faint low voice, "Sit down by my side—I have much to say to you ere I die!"

The plaintiveness of the tone in which these words were uttered and the pathos of the words themselves, went to the very soul of Lord Florimel. Bursting into tears, he took the proffered hand, and sank down on his knees by the bed-side, exclaiming, "Forgive me, Caroline—forgive me for the cruel wrongs which I have inflicted upon you!"

"This is the time for mutual forgiveness, Gabriel," she murmured in her silver voice, that was low and tremulous with emotions profoundly stirred and with the attenuating effect of coming dissolution. "Until within the last few hours I have hated you as cordially as I once loved you: but the approach of death—the counsels and the consolations of the kind-hearted chaplain—and the whisperings of some secret, unknown voice which appears to have arisen in my soul since the moment that I found myself standing upon the threshold of the grave,—all these influences have worked a mighty change within me—and I feel that I shall die more resignedly and more happily if we express and record a mutual pardon for the past!"

"Heaven knows how cheerfully—how willingly—how sincerely I forgive all and any injuries which you have endeavoured to inflict upon me!" exclaimed Florimel. "But can you, Caroline, as readily and as unfeignedly pardon me for the first tremendous wrong which I perpetrated against you?"

"Yes—I forgive you—unfeignedly forgive you, Gabriel," replied Caroline, her looks confirming her words.

"Then may heaven forgive *you* also the misdeeds which weigh upon your soul!" exclaimed Florimel, with a sacred fervour and a pious solemnity such as he had never before expressed or felt, but which were not the less sincere on that account: and having pressed the dying girl's hand to his lips for a moment, he rose from his knees and sate down on a chair by the side of the bed.

"I despair not of the forgiveness of heaven, Gabriel," said Caroline, in a firmer tone and with a temporary flush of conscious innocence upon her cheeks: "for I have naught to answer for save that frailty into which my love for you betrayed me, and that thirst after revenge which your infidelity engendered in my soul."

"How?—what mean you, Caroline?" exclaimed Florimel, regarding her with mingled joy and astonishment. "The crime of which you are accused—which has made you an inmate of this dreadful place——Oh! how happy should I be to learn that you are innocent——"

"I *am* innocent, Gabriel!" said the young woman, in a tone and manner that were imbued with all the deep feeling and profound solemnity of unquestionable truth. "Yes—I am innocent—and my guiltlessness will be shortly made clear to the world. Oh! if God would only spare me until that end shall have been achieved, I should die resignedly—nay, happily——"

"But the real perpetrator of the deed?—the murderer of the midwife?" exclaimed Florimel, interrogatively, and still under the influence of an immense surprise, although he doubted not for a moment the truth of all that the dying girl was telling him.

"The Hon. Arthur Eaton, who is likewise the victim of circumstantial evidence, knows everything," returned Caroline; "and he will make his own innocence and mine apparent at the same time. Let us not therefore dwell upon the subject: suffice it for you to be convinced that I am innocent of the stupendous turpitude imputed to me:—and without a sensation of loathing and horror may you therefore remain at my bed-side to hear the confessions which I am anxious to pour forth in your ears."

"Even had you been guilty of that crime," said the young nobleman, "I should have experienced no feeling of abhorrence towards you now: but I should rather have continued to look upon myself with additional upbraiding and reproach, inasmuch as I was the author of your ruin, and every incident that has since marked your career, whether misfortune or guilt, must have been regarded as the unavoidable associations of that destiny which my conduct shaped and formed as it were for your guidance. But these revelations whereof you have spoken, Caroline——"

"Listen—and you shall hear," said the dying girl. "Draw close to me, that I may not be compelled to raise my voice too loud—and interrupt me as little as you need. I shall surrender up my breath all the more happily if I make a complete atonement for any injuries which I have sought to inflict upon you. For now," continued the young

woman, gazing affectionately into the face of her seducer,—"now that I feel the approach of dissolution and that I must speedily quit this earthly sphere for ever, I experience a return of that love which my heart once cherished so fondly, so fervently for thee! Ah! the presence of death doubtless works grand and signal changes in the human mind,—quenching the fires of evil passions, and reviving the flames of those which were wont to warm the heart with a holier and purer influence! I could not leave this world in anger with thee: I longed to breathe the word '*pardon*' with my own lips, and hear it fall from thine. My wish has been accomplished—and I feel happier—Oh! much happier! But let me not waste precious time nor my own energies in giving expression to my feelings: rather let me at once proceed to deal with facts. Gabriel," she continued, in a more measured and a deeper tone, while she gazed half timidly up into his countenance, as if now shrinking from the task which she had imposed upon herself,—"Gabriel, you can but too easily conjecture the motives which led me to seek an introduction to your dwelling in the disguise of the black page Rao. I will not do more—at least for the present—than admit that I was animated by no friendly motive towards thee! You remember that shortly after I managed to obtain admission into your establishment, the Earl of Montgomery called upon you. While you were together I had occasion to enter the apartment to bring you a letter; and just as I opened the door I heard you say that all your papers and parchments were kept in a tin-box under your bed. The words struck upon my ears like a clue to something that was as yet unrevealed to me, but which I should sooner or later find out; and perceiving that your conversation with Lord Montgomery had taken a serious kind of a tone, I listened at the door of the apartment. First I heard the Earl speak mistrustfully of me;—and subsequently came the long narrative of love and mystery which you recited to the Earl, and which was elicited by the incident of the masquerade ticket and the blue domino. When you summoned me and gave orders that the domino should be burnt, I saw by Lord Montgomery's manner that he was chagrined and vexed: and I was struck by the suspicion that he wished to take your place at the masquerade. At the same instant the thought flashed to my mind that the whole affair might be rendered available to my vindictive purposes; and I resolved at all events not to burn the blue domino. As Lord Montgomery was taking his departure, I spoke to him in the hall; and he bade me come to him at Grafton Street in the evening. Thither I accordingly repaired; and accident led me to overhear a conversation which took place between himself and Mr. Rigden. This discourse related to the law-suit which Rigden was then about to commence against you; and I heard enough to convince me that it was already in my power to injure you seriously, if not ruin you completely. When Rigden had taken his departure, I explained my business to Lord Montgomery; and he gladly accepted my proposal to give him the blue domino which you had ordered me to burn."

"Ah! and it was Montgomery, then, who played the part of your accomplice at the masquerade!" cried Florimel. "But did he encounter the Unknown on that occasion?"

"Most assuredly—and it was for this purpose that he went thither," returned Caroline Walters. "Meanwhile Pauline Clarendon had fallen into a snare which I had laid for her; and her jealousy being excited by an anonymous letter——"

"I am acquainted with these particulars, Caroline," said Florimel: then, after a brief pause, he added "Pauline and I are reconciled—and she has told me everything relative to the part which she was induced to play so painfully in the masquerade."

"I am glad that you are reconciled—sincerely, unfeignedly glad," observed the dying girl, in a voice expressive of deep feeling. "May you be happy together—oh! may you be happy together!" and the tears rolled down her pale cheeks.

"You performed the part of a Gipsy on the occasion to which we are alluding," said Florimel, after another pause, which was longer than the previous one. "But let us not dwell upon this subject——"

"You understand that my motive was to estrange you completely from Pauline," resumed Caroline, with the abruptness of one who seeks to dispose as quickly as possible of an unpleasant explanation which it is nevertheless requisite to make. "I saw that you loved her—loved her devotedly; and as the consummation of your unhappiness was then, alas! my fixed, my inveterate, and my implacable aim, I had greedily seized upon the incident of the masquerade to cause a breach between yourself and that amiable, unoffending young lady. But, oh! this was not all the mischief which I worked against you, Gabriel," continued the dying girl, her cheeks faintly flushing for a moment with the excitement of her feelings. "I entered your chamber by night—I took your keys from beneath the pillow while you slept, and I purloined the documents from the tin-case under the bed. Those deeds I conveyed to Rigden, who did not hesitate to receive them at my hands. Ah! my vindictive hatred towards you *then* was fierce—ferocious—intense—diabolical. I would have sold myself to Satan in order to wreak upon your head a vengeance more refined, more excruciating, more torturing than any that unassisted human nature could devise. And do you not recollect the day when I told you the fabricated tale of a seduced and deserted sister? Oh! I saw you writhe and wince beneath the scourge of scorpions with which I was then lashing you so mercilessly!"

"And, by heaven!" exclaimed Florimel, "I suspected at the time that there was something sinister in the meaning of the tale—something darkly and terribly significant in your looks and words——Oh! yes—I did indeed writhe and wince, as you express yourself, Caroline—and even in that incident were you signally avenged!"

"The conversation was interrupted at the time by the arrival of your solicitor, Mr. Cresswell," resumed Caroline. "He brought you the intelligence that Mr. Rigden had given him notice of the suit—and you repaired to your chamber to fetch the deeds. I accompanied you thither:—and now does a pang of bitter remorse shoot through my heart, as I call to mind the fiendish satisfaction which I experienced when the word '*Ruin*,' bursting from your lips, fell upon my ear! But merciless as an avenging angel, I wrote to Mr. Rigden to inform him of the fact that the deeds had been missed, and that their loss had filled you with dismay. On the same evening you went out——"

"Yes—I remember," said Florimel, in a musing

tone: "it was to Horsleydown. But proceed Caroline."

"During your absence a tall footman brought a note to the house," continued the dying girl; "and I suspected that he was the same whom you had mentioned in your narrative to Lord Montgomery. Indeed, from the studious manner in which he averted his countenance as he delivered the note and a message, I felt but little doubt upon the point; and the nature of the questions which you put to me on your return, ratified my suspicions. The tall footman came back at midnight: you went away with him—and I determined to follow. To be brief, I succeeded in obtaining an entrance into the darkened boudoir at the same time that the unknown introduced you thither!"

"Good heavens! then you know who she is?" exclaimed Florimel, in mingled astonishment and curiosity "Tell me, Caroline—who is the woman that was enabled for a season to render me the slave of her fascinations—the victim of her magic allurements——"

"Patience Gabriel — patience — and you shall know everything!" said Miss Walters, who appeared to acquire an increase of energy as she thus progressed in her explanations. "You doubtless remember the discourse which took place between yourself and the Unknown on the occasion to which I am referring. She told you how passionately she loved you—and the sincerity of the avowal might be gleaned from the fervid tone in which she spoke, more even than from the fond ardour of her caresses. The latter might have arisen from sensuous passion: but the voice received its intonation and its accent from a feeling that was calculated to survive satiety. Here, then, was another rival for me: and I found that you were well disposed to plunge head-long into the vortex of pleasure, mystery, and folly thus darkly but enchantingly opened at your feet. When completely under the influence of her charms and her fascinations, you were gradually drawn on to give an attentive and even eager ear to the avowals which she made relative to her hope of becoming your bride. She stipulated her conditions—saying, '*Make me your wife, and I will stifle the law-suit which otherwise must inevitably ruin you in respect to fortune and despoil you of your rank.*'—I saw that you would yield; for it was easy to perceive how powerful, how subtle, how well applied were the syren's fascinations, and how weak was your power of resistance. On quitting the house at four o'clock in the morning, I did not fail to examine it sufficiently to enable me to recognise it again——"

"And that house—where is it?" demanded Florimel. "Tell me, Caroline—tell me—I am dying with impatience!"

"Would you return to your syren-charmer?" asked the dying young woman, in a tone of mild and melancholy remonstrance.

"Not for worlds!" ejaculated Florimel, with the accent and manner of the firmest resolve. "It would be as impossible to entice an angel to sin, as for that Unknown, with all her witcheries and wiles, to allure me back to her arms. No—the dream is dissolved, for ever—the spell is broken, never to be renewed—the magic influence has disappeared before the talisman of Pauline's virtuous love!"

"I am rejoiced to hear you speak thus resolutely—thus firmly," said Caroline: "for I shall die with your name upon my lips—accompanied by a blessing—and God grant that you may henceforth prove stronger than all the fascinations, allurements, and blandishments which a refined sensuality can possibly devise or a consummate artfulness be enabled to practise. Let me, however, hasten to the end of my explanatory remarks: and then, Gabriel—and *then* will I breathe in your ear the name of her who must not any longer be an Unknown to you."

"Proceed, Caroline—proceed," said Lord Florimel, somewhat impatiently.

"You remember that one evening, when attired in female apparel," resumed Miss Walters, "you were insulted in Chancery Lane and that you took refuge in a lock-up house. I was following you at a distance—as was frequently my wont, though invariably unperceived by you. You remained in the lock-up house; and at the expiration of an hour or two I became wearied of waiting for your reappearance. The bailiff's follower was standing at the door; and from him I learnt that you were to pass the night at the establishment, in company with Mrs. Fitzherbert and Lady Letitia Lade. Further and more particular inquiries, which I caused to be made, led to the discovery that you were actually sharing the same bed-chamber with those ladies—although of course your real sex was unsuspected by either the bailiff or his man. Here was a glorious opportunity, as I thought, to advance another step in the working out of my revenge! Straitway to the West End did I repair—and a note, which I hurriedly penned and left at Carlton House, informed the Prince of Wales that Lord Florimel, disguised in female apparel, was sleeping at the sponging-house along with Mrs. Fitzherbert and Lady Lade. But his Royal Highness was not at home when the note was delivered; and I waited in the vicinity of Carlton House until two in the morning to watch for his return. I fancied it to be quite probable that if he felt outraged by the conduct of Mrs. Fitzherbert he would at once repair to the lock-up house for the purpose of detecting her in your company: but in this calculation I erred. The Prince returned to Carlton House soon after two, and did not issue forth again so speedily as I expected. I accordingly repaired home to Piccadilly, and lay down until seven o'clock. Then I retraced my way to Chancery Lane to watch the issue of the adventure. Soon after nine the Duchess of Devonshire and the Countess of Desborough arrived at the lock-up house—and a little while later his Royal Highness himself made his appearance in a plain carriage. These arrivals I beheld from the window of a neighbouring coffee-house, where I had taken my post. After a time, Lady Desborough and yourself came forth. You entered her ladyship's carriage: and it was evident from her bearing towards you that she fancied you were really what you seemed — an elegant lady Or else, the Countess must be the veriest hypocrite in existence——"

"No: she believed that I was Miss Plantagenet," observed Florimel. "But pray proceed, Caroline."

"Well, you drove away in company with her ladyship; and I followed in a hackney-coach at a distance. You repaired to Bellenden Priory——"

"Yes," exclaimed Florimel: "and now——"

"Patience, Gabriel — patience," said Caroline. "Three days elapsed after that incident—and you

did not return home. I felt assured that the syren had enmeshed you in the trammels of her seductive blandishments—and once more did I penetrate into the boudoir of darkness, where mysterious enjoyments and raptures had intoxicated you aforetime. And you were there,—yes, there—in the dense obscurity of the place, and attended by its presiding genius. Most interesting, too, was now the conversation which took place between you. The Unknown brought all the artillery of her wiles—all the seductive powers of her language—all the lavish fascinations of her tone and manner,—and all the insidious allurements of her caresses, to bear upon your mind and temperament on that occasion. And attenuated as you were by indisposition, it was no wonder if you yielded with more than even your characteristic readiness: and in the infatuation of your soul, you vowed to pay a blind and implicit obedience to the dictates of the Unknown. Could you not see that when she enjoined you to leave London and repair to Dover, it was to remove you to a distance where the chance of being reconciled to Pauline was immensely diminished?"

"I had no time for reflection on that occasion," said Lord Florimel. "All my feelings were in a state of bewildering excitement—all my senses were absorbed in the raptures which that woman, whoever she be, knows so well how to create and maintain in the soul. But is it possible you were a listener to all that discourse which must have made me seem in your eyes the most insensate, rash, and consummate madman in all Christendom?"

"I heard every syllable that was spoken," returned Caroline; "and I already entertained a presentiment that in the progress of the strange and romantic connexion which existed between yourself and the Unknown, something would transpire favourable to the one grand object of which

I never lost sight—namely, my revenge! Determined, therefore, to be enabled to convince the syren lady at any moment that I was acquainted with her secret, I took the opportunity to cut away a small piece from one of the curtains surrounding the bed, and another piece from the window drapery. Then, while you were sleeping and the lady had withdrawn, I effected my departure from the mansion. The rest of my narrative may be disposed of in a few words. You went to Dover—you wrote to London to order me to repair thither—and I soon ascertained that the Unknown was likewise a resident at the sea-port. Your meetings continued to take place under the same veil of mystery that had shrouded them in London. On an unfrequented part of the sea-beach you were wont to meet the tall domestic at night time: then your eyes were bandaged—and you were conducted to the house which the lady had taken in a secluded spot outside the town. In a short time you took me into your complete confidence—you revealed to me the fact that you intended to marry the Unknown—and you explained to me all the stipulations which she had made relative to the mystery that was to enshroud her name and likewise retain the veil over her countenance until after the nuptial knot was tied. Then did the idea strike me that the affair was at length taking a turn calculated to suit my own purposes; and I resolved to put my ingenuity to the rack, strain every nerve, and direct every artifice towards the accomplishment of my end. This was to become Lady Florimel instead of your syren charmer: and scarcely had I formed the idea, when I already pictured to myself the rage and despair, the fury and the affliction that would come upon you when the cheat was discovered. The time came: you sent me on before you to London to settle all the requisite arrangements for your bridal—and I need not pause to remind you how nearly I succeeded in becoming indissolubly yours! Had it not been for the sudden entrance of the maniac wretch who subsequently died of hydrophobia—or had he even thus burst in upon us a few minutes later—all would have been over! But fate willed it otherwise—and doubtless the result, as it did occur, was for the best."

"But the Unknown, Caroline—the Unknown?" exclaimed Florimel. "How did you contrive to take her place?—what has become of her?—and who is she?"

"By the knowledge of her secret, and by displaying one of the pieces of drapery cut from the curtains in the boudoir," said Caroline, "I was enabled to coerce her at will. After the failure of my stratagem, and when I fled precipitately from Mrs. Brace's house, I wrote a letter to the Unknown enjoining her on no account to attempt a renewal of her connexion with you, if she valued her reputation and her honour: for that I would mercilessly expose her if she dared act in contravention to my commands."

"But wherefore did you adopt this course, Caroline?" inquired Florimel. "Surely it would have been a pleasurable spectacle to you, ere the change came over your vindictive frame of mind, to behold me rush headlong into the vortex of infatuation and folly by marrying that unknown lady?"

"No, Gabriel: I feared that if you married her, she would indeed be able to persuade George Woodfall to abandon the law-proceedings instituted against you: and *then*, previously to the recovery of the documents from Rigden, your case was hopeless in the extreme. I have now told you everything—I have explained all. Having for a season pursued you with unrelenting rancour—having seized upon every opportunity to strew your path with thorns and raise up difficulties around you—I am now brought, by the imminence of death, to that frame of mind which renders me truly contrite and penitent for the past. Though deep were the wrongs which I sustained at your hands, I ought to have mastered myself to pardon them—or at least to bear them resignedly, instead of seeking a detestable revenge."

"No, Caroline—now you are falling into extremes," cried Florimel. "I behaved most vilely to you—and you would have been deficient in a proper spirit had you not smarted under my conduct and sought the means of revenge. But your explanations are not quite complete: you have forgotten to name the Unknown——"

"I am growing faint, Gabriel—my strength is exhausted," murmured Caroline, in a low and tremulous voice; "a dimness comes over my eyes——"

"But the name, Caroline—the Unknown?" whispered Florimel, in as urgent a manner as feelings of propriety and delicacy would permit him to adopt under the circumstances.

"Bend down your head—nearer——closer, Gabriel," said the dying girl, in a still lower and fainter voice. "Let me imprint one last kiss upon your cheek——Pauline herself would not be displeased were she here now —— there—'tis the kiss of complete reconciliation——"

"And you pardon me, Caroline?" said Florimel, tortured with suspense to have his other query answered.

"Yes—God knows how sincerely I pardon you," was the gentle and scarcely audible response: but the glazing eyes looked up with a last expiring fondness at the young nobleman.

"And the name——the name of the Unknown?" he said, in an agony of suspense.

"Ah! I had forgotten," were the words that wavered upon the lips of the dying girl: then, with a last effort, she breathed a name in the ear of Florimel, and fell back senseless upon her pillow.

At the same instant it happened that the surgeon, followed by the nurse, entered the chamber: and upon beholding the state in which Caroline was, the medical man hastened to adopt restorative means. These succeeded in bringing her back to life, but not to consciousness: and, in answer to a question whisperingly put by Florimel, the surgeon said that she might haply linger on a few hours—but that her existence could not possibly be prolonged to days.

Sad and sorrowing did Lord Florimel throw a farewell look upon the unfortunate young girl whom he had known so beautiful, but who now lay there like a lily which the rude hand of man had plucked from the stem of its pride and the garden of its purity, and thrown aside, crushed and sullied, when the sense was rated with its despoiled loveliness. A fearful pang shot through the heart of the young nobleman as he thus gazed upon that form which he had once clasped, glowing and impassioned, in

his arms, and which now lay slightly quivering and gently convulsing with the pain of returning animation beneath the influence of the restoratives. The thought—the bitter conviction—flashed to his mind that had he never seen her—had he never known her—she might yet be in the enjoyment of a vigorous health and an unalloyed happiness, as well perhaps as of a stainless purity: and then followed the damning, cutting, lacerating reflection that it was he,—yes, *he*—the seducer—who had originally done the deed which turned the whole current of her destiny, and gave the impulse to that career which, commencing with shame, passed through the phases of blighted affection, terrible accusation, yearning vengeance, dark intrigues, and a criminal gaol, to terminate in a violent death!

And not only was he stricken by remorse—but he was moved to his very soul's foundations by a melting tenderness, because she had pardoned him! Yes—the poor, wronged, injured girl, when stretched upon the bed of death, had laid aside her resentment for the sake of her former love—had renounced her feelings of bitterness in order to woo back the faded reminiscences of brighter times and happier hours: and under this holier influence she had blessed him—and she had promised to die with his name upon her lips! Yes—Oh! yes—deeply touching was the contemplation of all this to the mind of the young nobleman: and he felt that there was a voice whispering the bitterest, bitterest reproaches in the profundities of his soul—and he now understood what remorse was and what conscience meant!

"Doctor," he murmured in a trembling tone as he drew the surgeon aside for a moment, "you will devote every possible care to that poor girl—and, should she survive a few hours more," he added, the tears running down his cheeks and his voice almost choked with emotion, "I will return and see her to-morrow."

"My lord," replied the medical man, "every attention shall be devoted to her."

Florimel pressed the surgeon's hand in grateful acknowledgment of this pledge—fixed one long lingering look upon the pale countenance where the light of life still vacillated faintly—and then passed out of the infirmary with a step as slow and a mood as full of despairing sorrow as if he were leaving a funeral scene.

And Lord Florimel felt something *within* which gave him the assurance that he was an altered man!

CHAPTER CCXXIV.

THE MURDERESS.

It was night—deep midnight: the iron tongue of Time had just proclaimed it from St. Sepulchre's tower;—and when Mrs. Brace, in her solitary cell, had done counting twelve, the awful silence which followed seemed more profound, more dreadful, more solemn than it was before.

The wretched woman felt as if she were engulfed in a more than Egyptian darkness, and entombed in a more than sepulchral silence: a tremendous consternation was upon her as she sate in the Newgate cell. Horrible thoughts were passing slowly through her brain,—thoughts that peopled the intense gloom with ghastly objects and ever and anon evoked whispering voices from the depths of the very silence itself.

The night was so dark that not the feeblest glimmering could penetrate into her dungeon. She was therefore immured as it were in a pitchy blackness which could almost be felt—and the massive walls of solid masonry beat back all sounds from without, rendering the interior of that cell as still as if it were a stone vault embedded a hundred feet below the surface of the earth. If there were orgies, or rioting, or weeping, or praying going on in other parts of the spacious establishment, not the faintest murmur thereof was borne to the ears of the wretched woman in her own cell: no noise, either of revelry or lamentation, could penetrate the immense wall which stood between herself and the companionship of the various felons'-wards;—naught could she hear, save the ominous loud-toned booming of St. Sepulchre's bell as it proclaimed the hours.

It was the middle of the night succeeding the day of so many and varied incidents,—that day, too, on which the milliner had wreaked her deadly vengeance upon Caroline Walters. Nearly twelve hours had now elapsed since the encounter in the passage; and the furious rage and vindictive wrath of the miserable woman had subsided into profound regrets and a terrible remorse. Thrice since the murderous deed was done had the turnkey visited her cell; and on each occasion had she demanded eagerly how it fared with Caroline Walters. The answers were but little assuring for the milliner: she learnt that the medical attendant had pronounced the wound mortal, and that it was impossible for Caroline to survive many days, even if she were to linger on beyond a few hours.

Mrs. Brace therefore knew that the blow which she had dealt, must sooner or later prove fatal;—and thus was she again and again a *murderess!* Oh! how appalling sounded that word even when breathed by the still small voice of conscience in the depths of the soul. The lips dared not breathe it: but the mind could not help *thinking* it—and the thought was purgatory itself! A murderess!—something from which human nature recoils with a cold shudder and with an icy trembling, as from the contemplation of a monstrous snake;—a being whose gaze even the strongest and most callous men are afraid to meet, and whose touch sends a thrill of horror to the very heart's core! A murderess!—something at which nature herself revolts, as if the deed made the very moon look red, the sun appear to set in blood, and the stars to grow dull and lurid as if their light had to penetrate through drops of gore!

The clock of St. Sepulchre's, we say, had just proclaimed the hour of midnight. Deep-toned and solemn was the bell as its oscillating metallic sound boomed through the heavy air, penetrating those huge walls of stone. The murderess counted each stroke—until she had numbered twelve: and then the excitement that reigned nervously throughout her form while the clock was striking, suddenly yielded to the awful consternation produced by returning silence. Her heart seemed to sink within her beneath the tremendous conviction that she was alone,—alone in the utter darkness—alone in the tomb-like stillness—alone with her harrowing thoughts!

But slowly—slowly did her imagination begin to people the dungeon with frightful shapes: ghastly forms, such as the disordered mind conjures up from the opening sepulchre and the yawning grave, began to rise in the midst of the pitchy darkness; and low murmurings, such as the troubled fancy conceives to be the voices of the dead, rustled as it were through the portentous silence of the place. Then, as the wretched woman sate in her dungeon-cell, with eyes wildly glaring and horribly dilating—with cheeks blanched as those of a corpse—with lips white and quivering—with upheaved bosom and suspended breath,—as thus she sate, we say, it appeared as if she actually and positively beheld real substantial shapes of ghostly horror, and heard whispering voices of unearthly sound.

Although a stupendous consternation held her motionless—paralysed her tongue and made her limbs rigid—yet were her feelings as acute and her sensations as keen as if no one faculty were suspended and no single energy held in abeyance. Hell was raging in her soul—the tortures of the damned were racking her brain. The perspiration stood in large drops upon her brow: she was drenched from head to foot in her own agony. If every sinew, nerve, and fibre were laid bare and torn with pincers—if the scalp were removed and a searing iron applied to the brain thus exposed—if her eyes were torn from their sockets and molten lead or boiling oil dropped into the holes,—in fine, if all the tortures which man could invent or fiends inflict, were now applied to her, they could not have exceeded the agonizing sensations which she experienced as those ghastly shapes began to arise in the midst of the darkness and those voices came like the low rustling of withered leaves upon her ear!

The wretched woman could not restrain the play of her imagination, so hideous in its fantastic conceptions. She had utterly lost all control over her disordered mind, which thus ran wanton and wild in the realms of horror. She had no power to check the current of her thoughts and look all the objects of her terror in the face. To her, therefore, did they appear invested with a terrible reality and a ghastly substance. In a word, she laboured under the appalling belief that the spectres were no delusion and the voices no dream!

What, then, was the nature of her reflections now? Reflections, indeed! No: the ideas that traversed her brain were scarcely reflections—because she had no power to weigh them deliberately or ponder upon their significance. They were impressions of a positive nature,—impressions of a hideous character,—and from which she could not escape! Just heavens! were the graves of Newgate opening in the deep midnight, and sending up their dead to haunt, appal, and scare her?—were the tombs of murderers yawning in the midst of the prison-pavement and yielding up their ghastly tenants to proclaim her doom?—were the ghosts of the hanged rising from their coffins, their winding-sheets, and their cerements, to hail her with the hideous welcome of the dead? O God! with reeling brain, and bursting heart, and quivering limbs did the wretched woman picture to herself this catalogue of horrors;—and the paralysis which had held her motionless hitherto, now so far relaxed its rigid influence as to enable her to writhe and twist with the spasmodic convulsions of a stricken snake as she sate in her dungeon-cell. Then in the excruciation of her feelings—in the rending violence of her agony, her teeth bit through her lips till the blood spirted forth, and her nails dug into the palms of her hands till they were clotted with gore!

For the shapes that were stealing slowly, slowly through the darkness, and crept up as it were from a yawning gulf into her presence,—a gulf that was blacker than the blackness of her own dungeon,—those dreadful shapes gradually appeared to become more distinct, as they ranged themselves in a line along the solid wall. Then she saw—or fancied she saw—that they had all halters round their necks; and she knew—or at least harboured the harrowing conviction that they were the dead whose worldly histories were black with crime and whose earthly names were associated with the gallows! Tall, stark, gaunt corpses were they,—with their features all convulsed by the agonies of strangulation—their glazed eyes half starting from their heads and fixed upon the wretched woman in ghastly recognition—their mouths partly open—and their long, lank, withered, naked arms extended towards the spot where the milliner was seated! And then the atmosphere seemed to grow damp, and raw, and clammy as if infected with the breath of those spectral shapes: it was the mildewed atmosphere of the grave—the chill and musty exhalation of the tomb—the earthy and sickly vapour of the sepulchral vault!

Yes—with extended arms and fingers pointing towards the agonising, horror-stricken woman, stood the corpses of the hanged ones, with the halters round their necks. And the foremost addressed her in a voice that sounded like the hollow wind moaning through the wintry forest and mingling with the low murmurs of the withered boughs and rustling leaves. A chill more intense, more searching, more penetrating than aught she had yet experienced, struck to the very heart's core of the wretched Mrs. Brace,—a chill that crept throughout her form and along every limb, with the cold clammy feeling of a loathsome reptile.

"We rise from the grave to welcome thee amongst us," spoke the corpse: and its looks and its breath shot like ice-shafts through the brain and the heart of the milliner. "From those deep and silent solitudes where the worm pursues its noiseless sport, have we risen to give thee the greeting of the dead! Thine hours are told—thy minutes are numbered! and while hell is yawning to engulf thy spirit, the grave is opening to receive thy body. With the world of mortals thou hast little more to do: thou standest on the threshold of the sphere inhabited by the eternals. For thee the quenchless fire is already raging—for thee the undying worm is sharpening its sting. A little while—and that form will be rigid—those limbs will be stark—those features fixed in death; and the earth will rattle down upon thy coffin-lid—and the huge stone will be set over thy grave—and thou wilt be added to the number of the doomed that sleep beneath Newgate pavement!"

"And the worm shall prey upon thy flesh," spoke the second corpse, whose stony looks and chilling breath were sufficient to freeze all in a moment the hottest blood that ever circled in the human veins;—"and even in the very grave shalt thou

have a sensation and a feeling that will cause thee to experience all its dreadful gloom. Yes—and thou shalt feel too that thou art imprisoned in a narrow coffin: thou shalt know the stifling, suffocating oppressiveness of that narrow home. Thou shalt long to breathe—thou shalt yearn to throw off that sense of choking and strangulation which will feel like a tremendous stone upon your breast and like pieces of lead upon your mouth and nostrils: thou wilt concentrate all thine energies in the endeavour to put forth one long, deep respiration—and thou wilt not be able!"

"No—and thou wilt feel the worms creeping over thee," said the third corpse, taking up the terrific story: and its pale blue eyes looked cold as marble and its breath was laden with the ice-chill of Labrador, mingling with the mouldy rawness of the grave. "The worms shall creep over thee, I say—and thou wilt lie stiff and stark in thy coffin, powerless to throw them off. The relief that is to be found even in the recoil of a shudder will be denied thee. But there shalt thou lie, while the worms will fasten upon thine eyes—force their way through the balls—and eat holes down into the depths of the sockets. And thou shalt experience all the hideous sensations attendant upon their slow and slimy movements, as they creep in and creep out;—and thou shalt long to vent thine agony and thine horror in a scream—but the seal of Death's silence will be upon thy lips!"

"Save at midnight," spoke the fourth corpse, whose stony gaze and chilling breath were as dreadful as his companions': "when thou shalt recover the power of motion and of speech, that thou may'st rise from thy grave and give to others that welcome which we are come to bestow upon thee. Yes—thou shalt form one of the tribe of troubled spirits and spectral shapes that enhance the horror of a Newgate midnight: thy grave shall open and thou shalt come forth from thy coffin and from thine earthy solitude, to render the hours of darkness hideous and appalling! To thee shall this dread privilege be accorded as well as to us;—and when thou art no more a denizen of the world of the living, thou wilt revisit this very cell in thy shroud and thy spectral terrors, to affright each doomed inmate in thy turn even as we are here to affright thee now!"

Then the band of unearthly shapes all extended their hands and pointed their fingers simultaneously towards the milliner; and their ghastly hollow eyes, leaden and dull with the stony stillness of death, were fixed upon her in a way that made her flesh creep upon her bones. And slowly, slowly—gradually, gradually, they advance towards her,—while she, quivering at her very centre and with a feeling as if a block of ice lay upon her heart, had no power to rise from her seat nor to recoil a hair's breadth from the appalling presence. She shrank as it were within herself—her very soul seemed sinking into a tremendous chasm;—while the dreadful shapes drew nearer and nearer, with their extended arms and their steady corpse-like stare,—until at length they placed their cold hands upon the shoulders of the miserable women. Then, as she felt the sanguine current of life stagnating beneath the touch of those hands so marble cold, a hollow moan escaped her lips;—and this breaking of a long and stupendous silence on her part, appeared to be the signal for a new phase in the wild and horrible drama. For now the fearful shapes suddenly seemed to become animated with a lurid fire that first spread over them as it were with a bronzing effect, and then increased in power so as to give them the appearance of transparency,—until the glow heightened to an intenseness which produced an effect as if the spectral forms were moving in the midst of a tremendous furnace. Thus, as horror succeeded upon horror, the brain of the milliner was shattered with the recurring paroxysms—her very soul was riven by the wildest tortures—and a cry, between a shriek and a yell, thrilled from her ashy lips.

The spell of her waking dream was dissolved in a moment: the ghastly phantasmagorian train vanished quickly as the eye can wink;—and once again was the milliner entombed in the darkness of utter night and in the silence of the grave!

For nearly a minute did she sit motionless while her ideas re-settled themselves in her brain: the stagnation of the blood gave way—the sanguine tide flowed languidly for a few moments, and then faster;—but the tide was turned—and the muscles also regained full play. She started up—she swept her open palms athwart her forehead upon which the perspiration stood in large drops;—and then, with a sudden half-pace forward, she extended her arms wildly, murmuring in a hurried, hoarse tone and with broken accents, "'Twas a delusion—a mere delusion—but how horrible!"

And then she sank back upon the seat whence she had risen; and her arms fell languid and dead by her sides—and once more was she struck by the stupor of a tremendous consternation and an ineffable dismay. Her very soul was crushed as with the weight of all the human woes that had gathered and concentrated for centuries and centuries:—and thus for a few minutes did she remain in the utter absorption and annihilation of blank despair. But all in a moment a pang shot through her heart and a feeling of horror traversed her brain:—and as a host of vivid memories swept over her spirit, conjuring up all her former enjoyments and contrasting them with her present agonies, the thought of her position goaded her almost to madness.

"Wretch, wretch that I am!" she murmured to herself, in sharp and impatient accents, as she beat the bosom that palpitated with voluptuous feelings no more: "what a fearful turn have I given to the current of my existence! The other day I was rich, happy, and cradled in luxury: now I am the inmate of a dungeon-cell. Though full of health and vigour, the hand of death lies cold upon my shoulder! My God! my God! what have I done? into what an abyss of horrors have I plunged myself! Oh! is there no retreat?—is there no retracing the path of life for a few weeks—only a few weeks? Is it possible that I am in Newgate—that I shall be tried—that I shall hang to the gibbet? Or am I under the influence of a horrible dream—a fearful nightmare? Let me see," she continued more slowly: and as she sate in the depth of the impenetrable darkness of her dungeon, she placed her elbows upon her knees and rested her face upon her hands as she endeavoured to make her mental vision penetrate through the cloudiness and perplexity of her brain. "Let me see," she repeated, in a tone of measured precision, as if she sought to establish her points one by one

"I am assuredly the person I believe myself to be—Mrs. Brace—the fashionable milliner. I have been lovely in my youth and handsome in my maturer years: I have been the mistress of the Prince—I have been courted by all the highest, and richest, and noblest of the aristocracy. And yet as I now look back upon my life, it appears to have been only a dream,—one long, continuous dream of pleasure and voluptuousness,—and not a reality. Yet there are circumstances in my career on which my retrospection looks with a sensation of pleasure. Yes—those hours of burning joys which I passed with the Prince when first I knew him; — aye, and those nights of bliss which I have spent in the arms of Eugene Montgomery! Ah! now another fact arises to my mind. I recollect that night—that night of alarm and menace—on which a man entered my chamber when Eugene was my companion. And that man—he was my husband!—and Eugene heard all that passed between him and me—and he sprang from the bed—and they wrestled a moment—and then Eugene conducted my husband down stairs and made him quit the house. Ah! how well do I remember all the details of that scene! But why do I now dwell upon it? Because it was the last time that Eugene Montgomery visited me: no doubt he was disgusted at the discovery that the ruffian was my husband! Since then all seemed to go ill with me: misfortunes accumulated rapidly—and I was enmeshed in the inextricable web of crime ere I had even a moment to pause and reflect upon what course I should pursue. Crime!—yes, crime!—crime the most horrible, the most deadly, the most unpardonable!" exclaimed the wretched woman with thrilling accents of terror, anguish, and despair. "Crime!—aye, crime that will send me to the scaffold! Oh! that dreadful word—that shocking idea! Can it be that I am in my sound senses—that I have done all these things—and that I must hang, hang, hang upon the accursed gibbet?"

And the miserable woman's voice rang piercingly through the cell, making the very air vocal with human agony.

"The gibbet!" she repeated, after a few moments' pause—and her dress rustled as her entire frame shook from the crown of her head to the soles of her feet: "the gibbet! Who breathed that frightful word in my ears? Hah! I remember! Yes—they were here ere now—those ghastly things that welcomed me amongst them! Holy God! am I then already looked upon as one dead? Is my coffin made—is my shroud sewn—is my grave dug? Yes—yes—*they* said it was so! But never, never will I perish on the scaffold!" she suddenly exclaimed with a wilder excitement as she sprang to her feet. "What! to have the cord fastened round my neck by the rude hands of the executioner—to go forth upon the scaffold—to be gazed upon by thousands and thousands—and then to drop, to hang, and swing——Oh! no—no!"

And the wretched woman clasped her hands together with all the violence of an excruciating anguish.

But her excitement increased: it rose to a delirium—a frenzy of terrors. She tore her hair—she beat her bosom—she dashed her open palms violently against her brows as she gave vent to ejaculations of mingled despair and woe. Her grief was wild—her lamentations piteous. Through the dense darkness of the dungeon the scaffold loomed to her imagination. She saw it all,—yes, all the dread paraphernalia and procession of death,—the chaplain, the sheriffs, the executioner—and her own self, with the halter round her neck!

Frantic with mingled terror and dismay, despair, and horror, the wretched woman rushed across her cell to escape from the spectacle which her imagination had conjured up. But she stumbled over a stool and hurt herself severely. The pain maddened her all the more goadingly: a lava-stream was circulating in her veins—sparks flashed before her eyes—her brain was seething. Existence was now a perfect hell—life was an excruciation. No—not life itself: because she would have given her soul to save herself from a premature death—she would have surrendered all her hopes of an hereafter to prolong the present. It was not exactly life, then, that had become intolerable;—but it was the prospect of ending this life on the scaffold, that was infusing a horrible madness into her veins, and torturing her whole being into an agonizing frenzy.

What could she do?—was there no hope? To this latter query did every convi ction of her mind, and every circumstance of her position give back a stern, uncompromising negative. *There was no hope!* Her doom was fixed: her death was certain. Then to anticipate the penalty which human justice was sure to inflict! Ah! *that* now became the dominant idea in her brain;—and the maddened woman resolved upon self-destruction!

There was such a fearful hurry in her brain—such a wild excitement in her manner, that she did not pause to reflect upon the resolve to which her agonising, burning, torturing, scorching, searing sensations hurried her. A demon appeared to have taken possession of her mind—a fiend was ruling her senses. With desperate hand she unfastened her apparel—drew forth the stay-lace—and tore away as many tapes and strings as the female vesture can ordinarily supply: then, refastening her dress as well as she was able, she sate down upon her iron-framed pallet to twist all those tapes and strings into one strong cord. The whole of this proceeding was the work of a very few moments; and though the hands of the wretched woman trembled as nervously as her entire frame quivered,—though her pulses were beating with a rapidity beyond all counting, and her veins were running with a lava-stream that was as furious as it was burning,—though madness was raging in her brain and the demon of despair was tugging at her heart-strings,—nevertheless, she achieved her dread preparations with a marvellous rapidity.

The rope was woven,—woven by her subtle fingers in the midst of the dense impenetrable darkness: and then she bethought herself of the bars that defended the window of the dungeon—and likewise of the stool against which she had stumbled a few minutes back! All the means of death were thus at her disposal—within her reach—fearfully available;—and she hesitated not—no, not even for an instant! On the contrary, her proceedings were as quick and her movements as rapid as if there were no darkness to impede her: it appeared to her as if she could *see* her way easily, as she *felt* it through the pitchy blackness in which she was entombed. But then her mind had a horrible clearness with regard to all the details of that suicidal process: for she was resolved to

cheat the hangman—the gallows—and the multitudes that throng to the spectacle of death, as the carrion crows gather around a corpse!

Great, then, was the precision with which the determined, desperate woman tied a running knot in the cord which she had woven;—and it was even with a feeling of triumph—dreadful, savage, ferocious triumph—that she flung the noose over her head. Then mounting upon the stool, she fastened the other end to the bars of the window: and now——

——And now, all her suicidal preparations being complete, and the impenetrable, immeasurable abyss of eternity already opening before her mental vision, she stopped short—for a sudden consternation overwhelmed her! Still standing upon the stool, with the cord of twisted tapes round her neck, the miserable woman was struck with dismay as she now looked death face to face. Hell seemed to be opening at her feet: beyond the more than Egyptian darkness which prevailed in her dungeon, the lurid fires of Satan's kingdom appeared to burn!

But at the moment when, thus stricken with dismay and overpowered by dread horror, the murderess was experiencing a revulsion of feeling which would inevitably have ended in the abandonment of her suicidal project,—at the moment, we say, when her thoughts reached that turning-point and her ideas arrived at that juncture at which she was on the point of flinging off the noose and leaping down from the stool,—at this moment was it that the clock of Saint Sepulchre's proclaimed the hour of one!

Suddenly broke that iron sound upon the deep silence of the dungeon-cell: suddenly rolled the metallic din upon the ear of the murderess. And with such startling, fearful, thrilling effect did it thus break through the utter stillness of the place, that the milliner was shaken with a strong convulsive spasm which made her totter upon the stool. With a desperate effort she strove to recover her balance: the struggle was as brief as the passage of a single idea through the brain—but it was the last frenzied effort of one who stood on the black brink of eternity! A sound between a shriek and a cry burst from her lips as she felt that the stool was upsetting beneath her—and down she fell!

But her fall was instantaneously broken by the abrupt jerk of the tightened cord: there was a sudden sensation as if all the blood in her body had gushed up, hot and boiling, into her bursting brain—and myriads of bright sparks flashed before her eyes. Desperately she threw up her arms and applied her fingers to the noose that was strangling her: but the cord was woven strongly and her weight was heavy—and thus she could neither break nor loosen it. Maddened by her dying agonies and by the rending thoughts that swept with the keen sharpness of razors through her brain, she tried to regain the stool with her feet—but it had upset and was *below* her reach: and then she strove, with the last energy of desperation, to raise herself up against the uneven rugged mason-work. But her attempts were unavailing—a sense of weakness came upon her with giant strides—and she swung and dangled, in her hideous convulsions, against the wall up which she could not climb. Her struggles—her death-agonies and writhings—had now lasted nearly a minute and were horrible beyond all delineation—frightful beyond any human power of description: but their acme was reached—their height was passed—and as their intensity subsided with a proportionate rapidity, their excruciating torments yielded to a numbness which speedily passed into death itself!

When the morning dawned and the turnkey visited the cell, Mrs. Brace was discovered hanging to the bars of the window. She was instantaneously cut down—and the surgeon was sent for: but he found the corpse quite cold and declared that the wretched murderess must have been dead some hours.

CHAPTER CCXXV.

THE EARL OF MONTGOMERY'S VISITORS.

THE day that dawned upon the deed of self-destruction which we have just narrated, was the 31st of May,—a day that was destined to prove memorable in respect to the conflicts between the Montgomerys and Lady Bellenden. Indeed, this was the day on which the Master in Chancery had undertaken to deliver his Report upon the various points at issue; and as the eventual judgment of the Lord Chancellor himself was certain to be influenced, if not altogether guided by the nature of that Report, it was feasibly assumed that the long pending process between the Montgomerys and the Bellendens would be virtually settled on this day.

The Earl of Montgomery rose from his couch at an early hour;—and gazing upon his image in the looking-glass, he murmured to himself, "I am pale—but not so pale nor ill as might be expected after the sleepless hours which I passed, and after the troubled dreams that haunted me during the brief slumber that visited me at length!"

The nobleman then proceeded with his toilette: but in the midst he stopped short—pressed his hand to his brow—and said impatiently to himself, "How is it that I cannot divest my soul of this gloomy presentiment? It is the influence of those unpleasant visions still overshadowing my imagination. Wherefore should my heart sink within me? why should my hand tremble thus? and how is it that I experience this feverish heat all over me? I have nothing to fear—nothing to apprehend. *My* secrets are all safe—Fernanda is staunch—and Rigden declares that I must gain the suit. Why, then, do I yield to apprehension? why am I a prey to terrors so indefinite and vague? Oh! it is that *one* fearful incident which has never ceased to haunt me since the date of its occurrence—an incident so full of mystery that I am as much at a loss to comprehend it now as I was on the morning after it took place! Fatal, accursed longing that impelled me to accept that domino and proceed to the masquerade! Madman, idiot, dolt, and dotard that I was to suffer myself to be so completely enmeshed in the fascinations of that syren, whoever she might be! And who *could* she have been? who *was* she?" exclaimed the Earl aloud, his tone and manner both indicating the excitement and petulance of a most painful, torturing perplexity. "The only being really and positively interested in playing such a part in order to worm out of me all my most precious secrets, is Laura Bellenden herself; and *she* could not have been the wanton who found a Montgomery in her embraces when she expected to receive a Fleurimel!"

The Earl's musings were interrupted by the entrance of Gilbert, his confidential valet, who was somewhat surprised to find that his noble master had risen so early.

"It is scarcely seven o'clock, my lord," observed the dependant.

"I am aware of it, Gilbert," replied the nobleman: "but I could sleep no longer—and my bed became irksome. Wherefore have you sought my chamber so early—a full hour before the usual time?"

"An old man requests an immediate audience, my lord," returned the valet; "and I therefore came to see whether your lordship was awake. He says that his business is important——"

"His name?" demanded the Earl, impatiently.

"Chapman, my lord," was the response.

"Ah! Chapman from the village of Bellenden!" exclaimed Montgomery, his heart sinking within him: for he could not possibly augur anything favourable from the visit of the old stonemason. "Tell him that I will be with him in a few minutes."

And while Gilbert was absent from the room delivering this message, the Earl performed the remainder of his toilette with feverish impatience: for, the longer he reflected upon the singularity of Chapman's visit, the greater became his apprehension that it could have originated in nothing favourable to his own interests. Having at length dressed himself, he hurried down stairs to the parlour where Chapman was waiting for him.

"What tidings, my good friend?" demanded the Earl, as he closed the doors of the apartment behind him.

"Something which your lordship ought to know," returned the old man, who had a forbidding countenance and a sinister expression of the eyes.

"Good or bad? Speak!" ejaculated Eugene, impatiently.

"Good, I should say," was the rejoinder.

"Then we may now converse at our ease, Chapman," said the Earl, flinging himself upon a sofa with the air of a man who has just had a considerable weight taken off his mind. "I felt assured that it must have been business of no ordinary importance that could have brought you up to London and made you come to me thus early in the morning; and I was fearful that something might have transpired relative to the vault——"

"There's nothing to apprehend on that score," interrupted Chapman. "Nobody in Bellenden village has learnt as yet, or ever will learn, that your lordship had most particular and private reasons for ordering your agents to employ me to open the Bellenden vault when they went down to the village three months ago. Of course Northwitch the sexton was very savage at the preference: but he could make nothing more of it *than* a mere preference."

"Good. And now about your visit to London?" said the Earl, inquiringly.

"Your lordship told me I was always to let you know anything that transpired," observed Chapman; "and therefore I thought I would lose no time in coming up. I left Bellenden the evening before last—took a chaise-cart over to Birmingham—and then got a place outside the heavy stage which landed me in London an hour ago ——"

"After two nights on the road—eh?" remarked the Earl. "Well—and you hurried away to me at once the moment you dismounted at the coach-office?"

"Just so, my lord," was the reply.

"And the object of your visit?" exclaimed the Earl, interrogatively.

"Lady Bellenden has been down at the village, my lord ——"

"Ah! But for what purpose?"

"To examine the vaults and the registers ——"

"The registers!" ejaculated Montgomery, with a start: then instantly muttering to himself, "But Chapman knows nothing about the register," he collected all his presence of mind and made a motion for the old man to continue his explanations.

"Her ladyship arrived at Bellenden the day before yesterday, in the early part of the afternoon," proceeded Chapman; "and soon after her arrival, her footman Richard took a post-chaise and went off somewhere else—but I don't know where. Then her ladyship proceeded to the church along with Parson Roberts, while Mrs. Margaret came and called upon me. I saw that she was up to something: for she was so tremendously polite—and I pretended to be very friendly and communicative the better to draw her out. At length, after beating about the bush a good deal, she began to touch upon your lordship's visit to Bellenden upwards of three months ago: then she talked of your lordship's agents coming down here immediately afterwards and employing me to open the vaults;—and then she began to pump me as to why your lordship showed a friendly disposition toward me—until she at length said plainly and openly that her mistress was the lady to bestow handsome rewards upon those who espoused her cause and furthered her interest. So then I let Mrs. Margaret see pretty clearly that if she meant bribery and corruption, I was not the man to be bribed and corrupted—and away she went quite in a tantrum."

"What on earth could she mean? what object could she have?" exclaimed Montgomery. "Unless she suspected that there was some little trivial incident on which you could throw some light, I am at a loss to comprehend her proceeding."

"Or perhaps she fancied that I know much more than I really do," observed Chapman.

"Possibly so," said the Earl, in a musing tone.

"For, after all, what could I have told her even if I had been inclined to talk freely?" continued Chapman: "merely that your lordship came to me about three months ago and told me that in a few days from that time your agents would be down at the village to inspect the Bellenden vault, the job of opening which should be given to me; but that I must not show any surprise on finding the mortar of the stone quite soft and other evidences that the vault had very recently been opened. Well, I promised to obey your lordship's instructions—and sure enough I *did* find that the stone had been lifted very lately: but I took care to hold my peace—and not even your lordship's agents suspected the fact. As a matter of course I can very well guess that your lordship, or at all events some persons employed by your lordship, had visited the vault with the utmost secrecy a few days before it was opened and examined in the official manner when my services were required: but whatever reasons your lordship may have had, or what you may have wanted to do in the vault, is no business

of mine—especially as your lordship paid me liberally to hold my tongue;—and therefore not a living soul, *in* Bellenden or *out of* Bellenden, is a whit the wiser for anything I may know."

While the stonemason was thus indulging in the garrulity which was characteristic of his old age, and which was also inspired by a feeling of pride at being in any way enlisted in the confidence of the Earl of Montgomery, no matter how slightly and partially,—while he was thus chattering, we say, the nobleman remained plunged in profound meditation: for the visit of Lady Bellenden to the village which bore her name, and the evident attempt of Mrs. Margaret to tamper with old Chapman, were calculated to trouble and perplex him.

"You say that the Marchioness proceeded to the vaults?" he at length observed in an interrogative manner when the stonemason had ceased speaking.

"She went there with Parson Roberts and Northwitch, my lord," replied Chapman: "but I don't know what took place, beyond the fact that the corpse of the late Marquis, her ladyship's husband, was seen half hanging out of its coffin——Ah! I noticed it when I opened the vault for your lordship's agents three months ago," observed Chapman, interrupting himself in the course of his explanations: "but I didn't know at the time that it was the late Marquis——"

"Nor did I suspect that such was the case," thought Montgomery within himself, "on that memorable night when the coffin exploded with a din that terrified the two men——But proceed with your narrative, Chapman," suddenly exclaimed Eugene aloud, thus cutting short the current of his own retrospective musings. "You were telling me that when the Marchioness, accompanied by Mr. Roberts, and attended by Northwitch, visited the vault the day before yesterday, they saw a corpse hanging half way out of its coffin——"

"Yes, my lord," said Chapman; "and it appears

that before they ascertained whose body it was, some observations were made which confused and irritated her ladyship most strangely. Northwitch's assistant told me about it within an hour after the visit of the Marchioness to the church: and it was on hearing of this matter that I resolved to come up to London and see your lordship."

"Well, my good friend," exclaimed Montgomery, inwardly cursing the garrulous circumlocution of his rustic partizan,—"and what was it that thus agitated and annoyed the Marchioness?"

"Because the corpse of her late husband, my lord," responded Chapman, "was so blue and swollen, and presented such an extraordinary appearance, that Northwitch declared the deceased must have been poisoned——"

"Poisoned!" ejaculated Montgomery. "Ah! a light breaks in upon me——But go on—go on, my good friend!"

"Well, my lord," continued the stonemason, "it seems that her ladyship was sadly put out; and she read Northwitch a long lecture on the subject. Altogether, Northwitch's assistant assured me that the incident had excited the strangest suspicions in his breast—the more so that Northwitch also observed, quoting me as the authority and calling me a scandalous fellow for my pains, that her ladyship was reported to have detested the Marquis when she was forced into a marriage with him, and to have even loved another——Besides," exclaimed the old man, interrupting himself all in a moment as another idea flashed to his recollection,—"did not the Marquis of Bellenden die very suddenly and suspiciously?"

"That was precisely the thought which struck me just now and which broke upon me like an inspiration," said Earl Montgomery. "But go on, Chapman: what more have you to tell?"

"Nothing particular, my lord," was the answer. "I thought you would like to hear that there is some reason to suppose the Marchioness poisoned her husband," he added, lowering his voice to a mysterious whisper; "and it was in reference to those tidings that I assured your lordship at the beginning that my errand was not of an unfavourable nature."

"I am obliged to you Chapman—much obliged to you—for the interest which you have taken in my affairs," said the Earl, rising from his seat and pacing the apartment in a reflective mood. "What, after all, if my cousin Laura should prove to be a consummate hypocrite? If she were really guilty of the crime of murder—if she were capable of poisoning—she could also play the wanton and the harlot, and conceal her debaucheries beneath that eternal garb of widowhood! Heavens! if it were indeed she on whose panting, heaving bosom I lay pillowed in the boudoir of darkness and mystery, when in a moment of rapturous idolatry and sensuous intoxication I revealed to the ears of the enchantress those tremendous secrets——"

The Earl's musings were interrupted at this point by the entrance of a domestic, who came to announce that Mr. Rigden's head-clerk requested an interview with his lordship.

"Where is he?" demanded the nobleman, the quiver of suspense and excitement shooting through his frame—for he knew that the individual in question had been despatched into Warwickshire to make inquiries concerning his brother Raymond.

"I have shown him into your lordship's private sitting-room," responded the domestic.

"I will join him there," said Montgomery. "Take this worthy man with you to the servants' hall," continued the Earl, indicating Chapman by a look, "and see that he is well and bounteously treated."

Having issued these instructions, the nobleman hastened to the sitting-room where Mr. Rigden's head-clerk was waiting his presence. By the travel-soiled appearance and untidy toilette of the individual, it was easy to perceive that he had just come from a long journey and that he had passed the night in a vehicle; and the Earl trembled from head to foot as he thought within himself. "It must be a matter of no ordinary importance that could have induced this man to come straight hither the moment he set foot in London again!"

But the Earl had time to master his feelings and compose his looks while the head-clerk, who was naturally of a servile and cringing disposition, made him a low obeisance.

"You have just returned from Warwickshire, I presume?" said Montgomery, adopting a tone of curiosity, and subduing the feeling of painful suspense which was really dominant in his breast. "Have you succeeded in obtaining an interview with my brother? and has he complied with the conditions of that clause in our ancestor's will——"

"My lord," interrupted the clerk, assuming a tone and demeanour suited to the tidings which he was about to impart, but which he was not altogether sure would prove totally *new* to the Earl,—for the man of business had imbibed certain suspicions not very favourable to the nobleman;—"my lord," he said, with demure look and solemn voice, "you must prepare yourself to hear the most distressing intelligence concerning your poor brother, the Lord Raymond Montgomery."

"Good heavens! what mean you?" exclaimed Eugene, apparently labouring under the most torturing suspense.

"I mean, my lord," was the answer, "that your brother Raymond is no more!"—and the clerk, who had hitherto spoken with looks mournfully bent downward, now raised his eyes suddenly and fixed them upon the Earl with so peculiar an expression as to strike the guilty noble that Rigden's factotum was endeavouring to read the effect which his communication would have upon him.

"No more!—my brother Raymond no more!" cried the Earl: then covering his face with his hands and turning aside, he burst into a painful ebullition of woe—or at least appeared to do so.

"I am wrong," thought the clerk within himself; "and I have done the Earl an injustice. He is deeply affected at his brother's loss—and it was most uncharitable in me to suspect him of so foul a deed!"

And having arrived at this conclusion, the clerk, who took snuff after the example of his employer Mr. Rigden, regaled himself with a copious pinch of the pulverized weed: but he took it with a careful noiselessness, the grief of Lord Montgomery now appearing to be too violent for the slightest interruption.

"But tell me, my good friend—tell me," exclaimed the Earl, suddenly turning towards the

clerk and speaking in broken accents the profound grief of which corresponded with his looks,—"tell me when and under what circumstances my poor brother died!"

"My lord," resumed the clerk, his tone and demeanour increasing in solemnity, now that his suspicions relative to the Earl were allayed and that he could respect the nobleman's grief,—"my lord, your brother has been most foully and mysteriously dealt with: in plain terms, his death has been a violent one—and murder has done its frightful work!"

"Murder!" echoed Lord Montgomery, his countenance becoming livid and ghastly. "No—no! you cannot mean that my poor Raymond has been murdered!"

"It is, alas! too true, my lord," answered the clerk. "Yesterday morning, between seven and eight o'clock, and in the company of the Marchioness of Bellenden, who was present at the mournful scene, I beheld the remains of Lord Raymond dragged forth from the buttress of Malden bridge."

"You are talking strangely—most strangely," exclaimed the Earl; "or else my brain is confused and bewildered by grief. The Marchioness of Bellenden present at the time—my brother's remains—the buttress of a bridge——"

"Oh! my lord, it is indeed too true," cried the clerk; "and the terrible spectacle will haunt me for the remainder of my life. I am sorry that accident led me to the spot at the moment when the young lord's body was discovered beneath the stone!"

"But the Marchioness of Bellenden?" exclaimed the Earl, whose fearful excitement and alarm were taken by the clerk for a genuine affliction and horror at his brother's appalling fate: "how came *she* there at such a time and on such an occasion?"

"To fulfil some ceremony with regard to the bridge," responded the clerk; "and as it was deemed requisite that her ladyship should deposit certain coins in the hollow of the buttress, the crowning stone was raised for that purpose. The dreadful discovery was then made that there was a corpse beneath—and this corpse proved to be the remains of your lordship's brother!"

"Good heavens! what will my poor mother feel?" cried Eugene, clasping his hands with all the apparent agony of despair. "It will be the death of her! But the Marchioness of Bellenden ——how took she the dread spectacle?"

"Her ladyship was as much shocked and affected as any one present," replied the clerk, "although every one bearing the name of Montgomery must be considered her enemy. But the Marchioness of Bellenden is a true Christian and a most excellent lady—you can read her character in her countenance——"

"And she was both shocked and affected?" exclaimed the Earl interrogatively.

"Very much so, my lord," was the answer. "Indeed, it was a scene——"

"I can well understand how distressing it must have been! Oh! my poor brother! my poor brother!" he cried, in a tone of bitter lamentation. "But is there no way of accounting for his death? does suspicion fall upon no one? Or what is the impression that the awful tragedy has left upon the minds of those who witnessed it?"

"No one seemed able to form a conjecture, my lord," answered the man of business. "But I came away so hurriedly that I had no time to glean any particular opinions——"Ah! stay, though," he exclaimed, suddenly interrupting himself: "I recollect that something was said about a private carriage being seen in the vicinity of the bridge, on the morning that the huge stone fell down—or was let down——For your lordship must know that the crowning stone had not been purposely lowered by the masons——"

At this moment a domestic entered the room, to inform his master that Lord Florimel requested an interview with him.

"Lord Florimel at this early hour!" exclaimed Montgomery, glancing at a time-piece which showed him that it was only eight o'clock. "I have just received intelligence of so distressing a nature, that I cannot see any one save upon business of urgency and importance."

"His lordship desires me to say," remarked the domestic, "that his business is of a pressing nature, but that he shall not detain your lordship many minutes."

"Then I will see him," observed Lord Montgomery;—and he repaired to the apartment to which Florimel had been shown.

The young nobleman was pale and care-worn: a profound melancholy sate upon his features so femininely handsome;—and, mingled with that mournful aspect, there was a certain sedateness which showed that the mind was influenced by no merely temporary impression, but that it had undergone a great and signal change. Tossed upon the waves of doubt, suspense, and anxiety as Earl Montgomery was, and having all his thoughts absorbed in the grave and momentous position of his own affairs, he nevertheless was struck by the altered appearance of his friend;—and hastening to take him by the hand, he exclaimed, "My dear Florimel, what is the matter with you?—has anything unpleasant occurred that you visit me so early?"

"Give me your patience for a few minutes, Eugene," said the young nobleman, "and I will explain myself. You remember my page Rao—— But of course you do, for more reasons than one. Well, that sable youth was none other than Caroline Walters—the young girl whom you saw at Mrs. Brace's——"

"And whom you seduced, Gabriel," observed Montgomery. "But is this possible? Rao and Caroline Walters, the murderess, identical——"

"She is innocent, Eugene, of the crime imputed to her," interrupted Florimel; "and a strange tale will no doubt transpire shortly, when the trial of Arthur Eaton, Lord Marchmont's son, comes on. For it appears that the cases are to some extent connected. But of that no matter. Caroline Walters, mortally wounded by Mrs. Brace——"

"What! Mrs. Brace perpetrated another crime!" exclaimed Montgomery. "Wretched woman that she is!—and to think how intimate she and I once were together!"

"Her mortal career is closed, Eugene," said Lord Florimel, in a solemn tone. "During the past night she committed suicide by hanging herself in her cell——"

"Better to die thus than perish upon the scaffold!" exclaimed Montgomery, with a singular emphasis. "Oh! the gallows must be dreadful—dreadful!"—and he shuddered as if he himself had some apprehension of the possibility of being overtaken by such

a doom. "But when did you hear of Fanny Brace's death?" he inquired, almost immediately

"Late last evening I was sent for to Newgate to receive the dying confession and the sincere pardon of Caroline Walters," answered Florimel, who did not observe the sinister nature of his friend's emotions: "and I promised the medical man that I would return this morning and see whether she still lingered on. Having passed a sleepless night, I rose very early and have already paid my promised visit to the gaol. Caroline Walters still lives, and indeed retains her full consciousness: but there is no hope of her ultimate recovery. As I was coming away the rumour was spreading through the prison that Mrs. Brace had just been discovered hanging in her cell; and on making the inquiry, I found that such was indeed the case."

"And thus terminates the career of the fashionable milliner of Pall Mall!" said Lord Montgomery, rather in a musing than a mocking tone. "The mistress of a prince—a courtezan in whose arms have reposed some of England's proudest peers—a procuress and a go-between——"

"Wherefore enumerate her failings now that she is no more, Eugene?" interrupted Florimel, in a reproachful tone. "Let us remember that if it were not for such voluptuaries as you and I have been, there would be no scope for the avocations of a Mrs. Brace. But let that pass. My object in paying you this early visit is dictated by those feelings of sincere friendship which have mutually animated us from our boyhood. In a word, I have resolved upon communicating to you a secret which poor Caroline Walters revealed to me last night——"

"A secret which regards me?" exclaimed Montgomery, wondering what it could possibly mean.

"I am not sure—perhaps it may," said Florimel: "at all events I shall be pursuing the safer course by breathing this revelation in your ear. Eugene," continued the young nobleman, after a few moments' pause, "I am acquainted with all the particulars concerning that masquerade at Covent Garden ——"

"Ah! then the secret regards the Unknown?" ejaculated Montgomery, his whole frame trembling with the poignancy of a suspense suddenly excited to the most painful degree. "But you will forgive me for having undertaken to play your part upon that occasion?"

"You were imprudent—most imprudent, Eugene," returned Florimel: "and you know not all the mischief that has resulted from your freak. But the friendship of years is not to be destroyed by such a thoughtless, foolish act on your part; and therefore we will not talk of forgiveness in the matter. The important point is whether you know who the syren-lady is ——"

"I do not," cried Montgomery, his impatience amounting to a positive excruciation. "But I would give worlds to learn that secret; and if you be acquainted with it, Gabriel ——"

"Softly—one moment," said the young nobleman. "Is it possible that intoxicated by her wiles and infatuated by her seductiveness, you made any communications which ought not to have been revealed to an enemy ——"

"Ah! an enemy!" repeated Montgomery, with a terrible sinking at the heart. "Do you mean me to understand, Gabriel, that the Unknown is ——"

And he whispered a name in Florimel's ear.

"It is she!" replied the young nobleman. "But as a point of honour you will retain this secret—— Good heavens! what ails you?" exclaimed Florimel, as he beheld his friend sink down, ghastly pale and trembling all over, upon an ottoman.

"Nothing — nothing," said Montgomery, the words seeming to come gaspingly from the agitated recesses of his heart: "a sudden indisposition——"

"No, my dear friend," interrupted Florimel, energetically; "it was no sudden indisposition. But it was a fright—a shock——Ah! if you in any way placed yourself in that woman's power, you will bitterly, bitterly rue your folly—your madness: for assuredly nothing short of utter madness could it have been!"

"It was, Gabriel—it was," said the Earl, in a stifling tone. "But I know something relative to herself — a crime which places her in my power——"

"Beware how you war against that woman!" exclaimed Florimel, with a voice and manner of solemn warning. "I have reason to know that she is a consummate adept in intrigue—a veritable diplomatist in all the worst arts of duplicity, deceit, and guile. Full nearly did she enmesh me irrecoverably in her snares; and now that I look back upon the past, I shudder when I think of the narrow escape that I have experienced. She is a snake that fascinates its victim—a serpent gifted with a dreadful power of charming and enrapturing those around whom she intends to wind her coils! O Eugene! if I told you all——but I cannot now—I have not either the heart or the leisure——"

"Would to God I had some proof that she is indeed the syren that practises her debaucheries under the cloak of the most tremendous hypocrisy that ever veiled the dissolute life of a Messalina!" ejaculated Eugene Montgomery.

"Proofs!—do you require proofs?" exclaimed Florimel. "And if you possessed them——"

"I think that I could silence her relative to any unfortunate admission which, in a moment of infatuated madness, I was beguiled to make," said the Earl, eagerly.

"Then behold the proofs!" cried Florimel, producing two pieces of drapery and handing them to Montgomery, who received them with mingled surprise and incredulity. "These are cut from the curtains in the boudoir where utter darkness was wont to throw its veil upon the wanton revels of that lascivious woman and her paramours. Display them before her eyes—and she will sink, ashamed and humiliated, at your feet. Caroline Walters possessed herself of them—and she gave them to me when I visited her ere now."

"Thanks—a thousand thanks, Gabriel!" cried Montgomery, his countenance lighting up with joy. "You have indeed proved yourself a friend—a sincere and loving friend—on the present occasion!"

"I do not attempt to penetrate into your secrets, Eugene," said Lord Florimel: "and therefore I do not ask you how you have placed yourself in that woman's power. But when I learnt from the lips of the dying Caroline that you had encountered the Unknown at the masquerade, and when I remembered that you were battling against each other in affairs of the utmost importance to both, it struck me

that a syren so proficient in all the artfulness of a captivating seductiveness would not have allowed such an opportunity to escape. I felt assured that she must have probed your heart to the very bottom—wormed out of you all your most sacred secrets——and every man *has* his secrets, of some kind or another——"

"True, true," exclaimed Montgomery, with nervous excitement.

"Knowing, I say, her disposition and her character," continued Florimel, "and suspecting that she would not fail to turn to her own purposes the accident which threw you into her arms, I thought that I would come and give you a warning which I foresaw must prove useful. I was aware, moreover, that this is the day on which you reckon so much: and hence the early visit which I have paid you and my importunity to see you."

"You have conferred upon me an obligation which I can never forget," said the Earl, pressing his friend's hand with the warm effusion of gratitude. "Alas! I have this morning received terrible tidings. My poor brother Raymond is no more: he has been foully murdered——"

"Murdered!" repeated Florimel, with the convulsive start of unfeigned horror.

"Yes — murdered — most foully, diabolically murdered," exclaimed the Earl with an outburst of grief that was apparently most violent and rending. "But I have not time to enter into particulars now, Gabriel," he added, in a less excited but deeper voice: "and moreover I recollect that I have not as yet broken the dreadful intelligence to my poor mother, who will be driven to despair!"

"This is shocking—most shocking, my poor friend," said Lord Florimel, his tone and manner displaying the deepest sympathy. "But you must lose no time in revealing the lamentable occurrence to the Countess: for should it reach her abruptly and without due preparation, from any other source, it may prove a mortal blow."

"That is what I fear," said the Earl: "and I will therefore lose no time in discharging this most painful—most agonizing task."

"I sincerely sympathise with you, Eugene," exclaimed Lord Florimel: and, unwilling any longer to intrude upon his friend's privacy, the young nobleman took his departure.

The moment he was gone, Lord Montgomery repaired to his mother's apartment, where he gradually broke to her the intelligence of her younger son's death. The wild agony of grief into which the unhappy lady was thrown, exceeds all power of description: her haughty, overbearing nature was bent, crushed, and overwhelmed beneath the stupendous weight of affliction which thus came down upon her. She raved—she tore her hair—she beat her bosom—and then she fell into a kind of torpor which lasted till medical aid arrived.

The Earl watched his mother narrowly throughout those paroxysms, until their agony was absorbed in the numbness of a partial stupefaction. The significance of every working of her countenance did he scrutinize—the meaning of every word she uttered did he catch with an intense anxiety; but he could not trace therein the slightest indication of any dark suspicion on her part. No—the poor lady imagined that her younger son had been foully dealt with by murderous robbers; and when, after the arrival of medical assistance, she regained full possession of her faculties, the piteous lamentations which she poured forth all proved that such indeed was the painful idea she entertained on the subject.

With a sensation of indescribable relief, amounting almost to a triumphant satisfaction, the Earl entrusted his mother to the care of the medical men and her own female attendants;—but with every outward symptom of a heart-felt woe, he ordered his carriage and drove straight to the dwelling of Lord and Lady Holderness in Cavendish Square.

CHAPTER CCXXVI.

THE LAW SUIT.

In those by-gone days when the "wisdom of our ancestors" is supposed to have flourished so pre-eminently, many curious conditions were frequently attached to the heritage of estates, the enjoyment of real property, and the succession to testamentary bequests. In those ages when the Roman Catholic Church was dominant in England, the inheritance of a vast fortune or an immense estate was frequently made conditional upon taking the oath in acknowledgment of the papal supremacy, or in confirming some monastic establishment in the enjoyment of certain tenures, rentals, privileges, and immunities: and, oftener still, the heir of a small property found himself obliged to make certain oblations to a particular shrine or pay for so many masses to be chaunted on behalf of his predecessor's soul. On the other hand, and in later times, when Protestantism had erected its temples upon the ruins of the papal establishments, the fanatic holders of estates frequently bound their posterity, as the condition of inheritance, to make a vow abjuring the Romish doctrines altogether;—and it is well known that many estates are inherited at the present day upon conditions which, though pared down into the simplest technicality or merest form, nevertheless originated in some such ancestral prejudices or whimsicalities as those at which we have hastily glanced.

A condition of this nature was traditionary in the Montgomery family; and thus it arose:—In the reign of Queen Elizabeth the *Bellenden* race was threatened with extinction, the then possessor of the Marquisate being eighty years of age, childless, and without any near relatives. He accordingly adopted the second son of the then Earl Montgomery; and Queen Elizabeth granted letters patent to enable the youthful scion of the *Montgomerys* to inherit the title of *Bellenden* in pursuance of that adoption. At the death of the old Marquis, therefore, the young Montgomery became possessor of the honours, rank, and estates of Bellenden; and he married a lady belonging to the family of *Aylmer*. They had one son, who, on growing up to man's estate, was seized with a violent inclination to travel upon the continent; and he set off accordingly. But years and years passed without affording any tidings of him; and his parents advanced towards the grave in the painful belief that their only son was no more. The disconsolate father was accordingly necessitated to make some testamentary arrangements relative to

the disposal of his property at his death; and he bequeathed his Priory estates to the then Earl of Montgomery, and the Warwickshire estates partially to that Earl's brother and partially to the Aylmer family. But as there had recently been a monastery upon the Warwickshire estates, the old nobleman, who abhorred papacy, inserted a clause in his will to the effect that the heritage depended and was made conditional upon the formal abjuration of the doctrines of the Romish church; and the heir was likewise required to sign a formal pledge that he would never rebuild nor restore that monastery, which had been destroyed in the reign of Henry the Eighth. In default of signing this abjuration and promise, the forfeiture of the Warwickshire estates to the next heirs was to be the consequence. The clause in the will prescribing these conditions, stipulated that the deeds of abnegation were to be duly signed and recorded on or before the heir's attainment of the age of twenty-two (which in those days was the period of majority); and moreover, the same will settled the entail of all the estates, thenceforth and for ever, in such a manner that the possessor of the Eaddom of Montgomery should always hold the Priory property in the vicinage of London, and his nearest relative the larger portion of the Warwickshire estates, the smaller section of which was to be enjoyed by the Aylmers. Such were the terms of the will made by the Marquis of Bellenden who lived in the latter half of the sixteenth century. But scarcely had the grave closed over him, when his son—the long lost one—returned to England, after having escaped from a lengthened and horrible condition of slavery into which he had been sold by Algerine pirates. As a matter of course he claimed the paternal estates; and the Montgomerys of that day, either through ignorance of the specific terms of the will made in their favour, or else through good feeling, did not attempt the slightest opposition. The existence of the will itself was soon forgotten: years and years passed away—and the Bellendens continued to inherit and enjoy undisputedly the vast estates which bore their name, until a prying, penetrating, astute attorney discovered the famous will and brought it to light. This occurred in the middle of the eighteenth century, about the time of the Great Rebellion; and the then Earl of Montgomery, on being apprised of the nature of the will, threatened the then Marquis of Bellenden with a law-suit. The matter was however compromised without litigation: the then Marquis of Bellenden agreed to make over to the Montgomerys a certain portion of the estates as a settlement of the points at issue. This was done: and the Conveyance Deed was duly drawn up and signed. But scarcely had the transfer been thus made, when the Montgomerys were plunged into serious pecuniary difficulties by the failure of certain speculations; and the then Marquis of Bellenden proposed to advance a large sum of money to re-purchase the portion of his estates which had been transferred. This transaction took place: the money was paid—and the conveyance-deed was restored to the Bellendens. The whole matter then slept for about twenty years:—when the Montgomerys initiated law-proceeding in good earnest. This step was taken by Eugene Montgomery's father, about thirty years previously to the date of our narrative; and as the matter was in due course more closely looked into, it transpired after a time that if the Montgomerys' claims were good at all, it must be Raymond on whom the Warwickshire property would devolve, while the Priory estates would fall into the hands of his elder brother. Eventually the Aylmers asserted their pretensions;—and thus originated and progressed the memorable law-suit of which so much has been said in the course of our narrative.

The reader will now understand how great was the importance necessarily attached to the Conveyance Deed above mentioned. On the side of Lady Bellenden it was urged that this deed contained the terms and evidences of a final compromise effected between the litigant families,—a compromise which quashed the Montgomerys' rights and claims for ever. On behalf of Fernanda—or rather Lady Holderness—it was urged that her family had been no parties to the compromise at all, they at the time being actually ignorant of the circumstance that they had any claims or pretensions whatsoever to a single acre of the Bellenden property. Lastly, on behalf of the Montgomerys it was at first alleged that their predecessor had no power to make any such compromise in a matter where, if the claims were good at all, the estates were all partitioned and entailed in a particular manner and upon specific conditions: and within the last three months of the suit, Eugene Montgomery had advanced another and more formidable plea—which was to the effect that the Conveyance Deed was a forgery, although he did not charge the Marchioness of Bellenden with having fabricated it.

The Conveyance Deed bore the date of 1795: but it was alleged, on behalf of Eugene Montgomery, that the Marquis of Bellenden (the father of Lady Bellenden's late husband) whose name was alleged to be affixed to that document, had died in the year 1793—consequently that he had been dead two years at the time when he was represented to have signed the deed. In proof of these statements Earl Montgomery advanced the facts that the plate upon the coffin of the Marquis of Bellenden alluded to, bore the date of 1793; and that the parish Register of Deaths, containing the entry of the said Marquis's demise, furnished the same date.

Such was the position of the law-suit on the 31st of May—the period fixed by the Master in Chancery for delivering his report upon the various points at issue. Nor did the legal functionary fail to keep his engagement—an occurrence in Chancery proceedings which deserves special mention. The report was ready; and its tendency was precisely as Mr. Rigden had foreseen—namely, in favour of his clients and hostile to Lady Bellenden. In short, the Master admitted the validity of Fernanda's plea that her family were no parties to the alleged compromise, even if any such compromise had taken place at all; and therefore, whether the Conveyance Deed were a forgery or a genuine document, the lady's claims were pronounced valid. With regard to the Montgomerys, the Master thought that if the Conveyance Deed were genuine, their claims must be considered as null and void: but he did not believe it to be genuine—he was of opinion that the proofs of forgery were sufficient, and indeed unanswerable—and he therefore pronounced in favour of the claims of the Montgomery family. Finally, and inasmuch as it appeared that one of the claimants

(Lord Raymond Montgomery) was not forthcoming, but was reported to be dead,—and inasmuch as it was at all events certain that he had not complied with the conditions laid down in the will of his ancestor,—it would result from the various points treated of in the Report, that the Right Honourable the Earl Montgomery had established his claims to the Priory property altogether; and that the Warwickshire estates must be partitioned between the said Earl Montgomery and Lady Holderness, in the proportion of one-third to the former and of the remaining two-thirds to the latter.

Such was the Report of the Master in Chancery; and although it operated not as a final decision, yet was it regarded as the basis on which the Lord Chancellor's judgment would be eventually founded. In a word, then, the triumph of Earl Montgomery and Fernanda over the Marchioness of Bellenden was regarded as complete by the gentlemen of the long robe.

CHAPTER CCXXVII.

THE FIRST ORDEAL.

It was between four and five o'clock in the afternoon of the same day, that Eugene Montgomery and Lady Holderness alighted from a carriage at the gate of Bellenden Priory. They were immediately conducted into the drawing-room, the servant informing them that the Marchioness would join them in a few minutes.

The moment the domestic had retired, the Earl said in a low hurried voice to his beautiful cousin, "I wonder what terms Laura is about to propose?"

"You have already wondered, Eugene, a thousand times since we received her note inviting us hither," observed Fernanda: "and all the wondering in the world will not help you to a solution of the mystery."

"Do you think it is a snare, my dear cousin?" inquired the Earl.

"For what purpose?" exclaimed Lady Holderness. "If Laura meant to hand us over to the grasp of justice, she need not have invited us hither for the purpose; she could have more easily sent the constables to our houses."

"How coolly—how dauntlessly you take everything, Fernanda!" said the Earl, contemplating her with mingled admiration and envy. "You would have made an excellent General for an army of Amazons."

"I certainly do not meet misfortunes half-way," observed Lady Holderness, smiling: then instantaneously resuming a serious expression of countenance, she said, "For heaven's sake, do not be pusillanimous, Eugene! You are trembling with nervous excitement—your agitation is positively visible! Take courage: we have gained the suit—and Laura is doubtless anxious to make terms. In fact, she says as much in the letter which she sent just now to request us to call upon her, and in pursuance of which invitation we are now seated beneath the roof of Bellenden Priory. I wonder whether she will ask you to accompany her to the boudoir," added Fernanda, with an arch look.

"Were you not astonished when I revealed all those startling things to you this morning?" said the Earl.

"I must confess that I was amazed," replied Fernanda. "Not that I ever entertained a particularly high opinion of my own sex——"

"Because you yourself are a wanton, my sweet cousin," interrupted the Earl, patting Fernanda's cheek familiarly. "But tell me—are you very much afflicted by the death of Lord Desborough? and why are you not in mourning?"

"As for being afflicted, Eugene," returned the heartless lady, "I have no leisure to devote to grief; and as for the mourning, I have not had time to order it. The intelligence of the accident which proved fatal to my uncle, only reached London last night—and all my thoughts have been engrossed by the law-suit."

"It struck me that your husband seemed very care worn and ill," observed Eugene. "He evidently was not over well pleased at my soliciting an interview with you alone this morning—still less at your accompanying me *tete-à-tete* in my carriage——"

"He doubtless supposes that I ought to have no secrets from him," observed Fernanda, hastily.

"And he is also rather jealous, perhaps?" said the nobleman, whose spirits appeared to be reviving somewhat.

"Think you, Eugene," said Fernanda, her scarlet lip curling with contempt, "that I am a being to be in any way moved or ruffled—unless it be to scorn — by a jealous man? No — no: I am too strong-minded to heed the more grovelling passions of human nature, when there are so many fiery and fierce ones meriting attention and worthy to stir up deep feelings."

"Whence comes this marvellous strength of mind — this indomitable courage on your part, fair cousin?" demanded Montgomery, with an expression of interest and curiosity.

"It is partly constitutional," replied Fernanda; "and it partly arises from the circumstance that I have taught myself to despise death, come in what shape it may. Or rather," she added, her voice sinking to the lowest audible whisper, while her violet eyes deepened into a sinister blackness,—"or rather, I am always prepared to encounter death, and even to rush forward to meet it in case of emergency."

"What mean you, Fernanda?" asked Eugene, gazing upon his cousin in mingled astonishment and dismay.

"I mean," she responded, in that low deep voice which was scarcely audible and seemed like the end of a harmony dying away,—"I mean that I am always prepared for the last extremity, rather than endure exposure!"—and as she spoke she drew from her bosom a small phial, not so large as her own little finger, and which contained a few drops of a fluid colourless as water. "Now do you understand me, Eugene?" she said, in a louder tone and with an accent of triumph, as she replaced the phial in the corsage of her dress.

"I do — I do," returned Lord Montgomery: then, after a few moments' pause, he added, "And should not I adopt a similar precaution?—should not I also carry about with me the means of instantaneous death?"

"I question, Eugene, whether your crimes are

so numerous as mine," said Lady Holderness, fixing upon him strange looks of sinister mystery: "and if they are not, you do not incur so many and such constant chances of detection as I do."

"Good God! what would you have me understand?" exclaimed Montgomery, startled by these words which seemed thrown out as the preface to some fearful revelation. "Have you committed any crimes beyond that which——you know what I mean——"

"The one that we perpetrated together — or rather caused to be perpetrated," added Fernanda; "and of which we shall doubtless hear mention made by the Marchioness presently —— But how long she is keeping us waiting!"

"Hush! she comes," whispered Montgomery in a hurried manner as he heard footsteps approaching.

The next instant the door was thrown open—and the Marchioness of Bellenden entered the drawing-room. She was clad in her usual mourning garb; and her countenance, though somewhat pale, wore that expression of sereneness which amounted to a benignity that nothing appeared able to disturb or ruffle. At the same time there was a certain dignified self-possession in her looks and manner which seemed to denote a mind not only at ease in respect to the opinion of the world, but also with regard to its own secret thoughts.

Advancing thus into the room with a mingled graciousness and matron-like dignity, the Marchioness of Bellenden saluted Lady Holderness and Earl Montgomery with a sufficient courtesy to be consistent with her position as the lady of the mansion, and with just enough reserve to convince them that she was by no means disposed to cringe and fawn although the law-suit was as good as decided in their favour.

Placing herself upon a sofa, she made a motion for Fernanda to take a seat by her side—while she indicated a chair close at hand for the Earl. And thus were the three relatives grouped together,—those three relatives, two of whom had been waging such a desperate warfare against the third!

While proceeding to take the chair pointed out to him, Lord Montgomery threw a hurried, furtive, but scrutinising look upon Lady Bellenden, as if he sought to pierce down into the very profundities of her soul;—aye, and more than that—for the searching glance had also a less refined object; inasmuch as it endeavoured to penetrate her very garments and trace beneath them every contour and every outline of the splendid form which they enveloped. And at the same time he thought within himself, as his looks swept over her placid —almost heavenly countenance, "Is it possible that a volcano of raging desires and frenetic passions lies concealed beneath that calm and tranquil exterior?"

While he was asking himself this question he encountered her glance—and it struck him that a slight flush appeared upon her cheeks and that a momentary embarrassment sprang up in her manner: but on darting another rapid, furtive look upon her, he found her aspect as serene and her deportment as untroubled as at first.

"I know not what to think," said Montgomery within himself: "she is either the most accomplished hypocrite that ever out-heroded Satan's duplicity—or else Florimel must have been deceived concerning her! But we shall see—we shall see," he added, in his silent musings;—and his doubt and uncertainty increased as he flung another look upon the Marchioness whose serenity bespoke a mind so profoundly at peace within itself and with all the world.

Meantime Fernanda had also taken her survey of Lady Bellenden—but in a less furtive manner than was observed by her cousin Eugene. Indeed she had fixed her fine violet-coloured eyes full upon the countenance of the Marchioness, who however met their steadfast gaze with the most imperturbable tranquillity: and when the Earl noticed this farther proof of extreme self-possession on her part, he was all the more perplexed—all the more bewildered. He knew not what to think: he could not possibly form a conjecture as to the probable result of the present interview. Would it end in exposure and ruin to all?—or would it terminate amicably? Was the Marchioness about to enact the part of a suppliant or a dictatrix?—would she make use of conciliation or a menace?

All those rapid exchangings of looks and all those thoughts that swept not only through the brain of Eugene Montgomery, but likewise of Fernanda herself, occupied but a few moments in reality, although they have taken us as many minutes to describe. For, in fact, almost immediately after Lady Bellenden joined her visitors in the manner narrated, the proceedings commenced.

"You were doubtless surprised," said the Marchioness, glancing first at Eugene and then at Fernanda, "to receive a note from me requesting your presence here. But on learning the result of the step which the law-suit advanced this morning, I thought it better that we three who are so deeply interested in that process should assemble and try the case for ourselves, so as to avoid the expense of any further litigation."

"Try the case for ourselves!" echoed Fernanda, gazing upon the Marchioness with indignant surprise.

"We are already in as good a position as if we had won it!" exclaimed Lord Montgomery.

"But you will both be so kind as to remember that it is not irrevocably won yet," said the Marchioness, with all the coolness of an imperturbable self-possession. "The Chancellor must pronounce his judgment——"

"It will be based upon the Master's Report," cried Fernanda, petulantly.

"Additional evidence may be offered, Lady Holderness," returned the Marchioness, in her quiet manner the very serenity of which was a reproof and a warning.

"Additional evidence!" repeated Earl Montgomery, feeling that this ejaculatory taking up of Lady Bellenden's words would bring the discourse to a crisis.

"Yes—additional evidence, my lord," replied the Marchioness: "and inasmuch as the testimony to which I allude will throw much additional light upon the case, I repeat my proposition that we three should constitute ourselves the judges thereof—and I will answer for it that within a couple of hours we shall come to a decision, whereas in Chancery we may still be kept waiting for years. Now, Lord Montgomery—and you Lady Holderness—what say you?"

"Is this a jest, madam?" inquired Fernanda, burning with vexation and spite.

"I never was more serious in my life," returned the Marchioness; "and you have no idea how *very* serious the matter may also be made for yourself and Lord Montgomery, if you reject my proposition for investigating it amicably. In plain terms, the evidence I have to bring forward, *must* be produced somewhere;—but whether in this drawing-room before our three selves, or in the presence of a still more solemn and certainly more terrible tribunal, I now leave for you to decide."

"Let us humour her ladyship and play at judges, Eugene," said Fernanda, her eyes flashing with the fires of concentrated rage—a rage which was enhanced by the apparently unprovokable calmness of Lady Bellenden.

"Well, let us play at judges, then," added Montgomery, wondering what was to follow.

The Marchioness took a silver hand-bell from under the cushion of the sofa, and rang it. A door at the farther extremity of the room opened—and an old man made his appearance.

"Austin!" ejaculated Lord Montgomery, thrown off his guard by this unexpected incident.

"Ah! I see that you know him, then?" cried Lady Bellenden: and turning towards the man, she said, "Do you also recognise this gentleman and this lady?"

"Since your ladyship has bribed me to come over to your side, I must speak out plain, I suppose," said Austin, putting a bold front upon the matter. "The truth is, then, that I know Earl Montgomery there as well as one man can know another; and I am also aware that the lady is Miss Fernanda Aylmer—or I should say, Lady Holderness."

"What have you in particular to relate concerning them?" demanded the Marchioness, with a solemn seriousness alike of tone and manner.

"Upwards of four months ago the Earl came down alone to my cottage near Bellenden village," resumed Austin, "and told me that if I would serve him in a particular manner he would recompense me well. I agreed; and he ordered me to go to Birmingham and procure several things which he named."

"What were they?" inquired the Marchioness.

"First, some skeleton keys that would open locks of any size, from a church-door down to an iron safe—next, some implements such as resurrection men use, and a box of their peculiar cement—and third, a coffin-plate with a particular inscription upon it. Those were the articles," continued Austin, "which I was ordered by my lord to obtain; and I did so, with the assistance of some friends that I went to at Birmingham. About three weeks after that, as near as I can guess, his lordship sent me a letter to say that he should be at my cottage on a particular morning, along with Miss Aylmer and two men—and that I was to lay in quantities of provender."

"And they arrived accordingly?" said the Marchioness.

"Yes, my lady—they came in a carriage on the morning named in the letter," returned Austin. "The Earl and Miss Aylmer wore masks; and the two men were the greatest ruffians I ever set eyes upon. Miss Aylmer went away in the carriage, which took her to Congleton: but at night it came back without her——"

"Never mind that point," interrupted the Marchioness. "What happened on the night of which you have just spoken?"

"The Earl and the two men went to the church, taking the implements, the cement, and the skeleton keys along with them——"

"And the coffin-plate?" inquired the Marchioness.

"Yes—his lordship had that with him also," responded Austin.

"And what was the inscription upon it?" pursued Lady Bellenden.

"It gave the year 1743 as the date of the death of the last Marquis's father," was the response.

"That will do," said the Marchioness. "You may retire, and send in the next witness."

Throughout the preceding examination, Lord Montgomery had remained leaning back in his chair, with his arms folded across his breast, and his eyes gazing up towards the ceiling: while Fernanda assumed a lounging posture upon the sofa, and appeared to treat the whole affair with sovereign contempt.

Austin retired;—and forth from the inner room came a very aged woman, but who nevertheless walked with a wonderful agility.

"Ah! and Widow Bushman also!" ejaculated the Earl, who had turned his head to glance at the new witness: then instantly resuming his former attitude, he seemed to be intent only on contemplating the chandelier which was suspended to the ceiling.

"Do you know this gentleman and lady?" demanded Laura: "and if so, what can you tell me about them?"

"I know Earl Montgomery and Lady Holderness, late the Honourable Miss Fernanda Aylmer," replied the crone. "Three months ago Lady Holderness came all in a hurry to my cottage near Congleton, and ordered me to prepare to receive the Earl and two men who would arrive within the ensuing twenty-four hours. She likewise bade me go into Congleton and purchase a couple of trunks each of which was to be filled with a quantity of apparel suitable for working-men about to emigrate. This I did—and her ladyship went away. Next morning at daybreak the Earl and two men came. The latter were the most murderous-looking villains I ever saw: but their appearance was a little improved when they had shaved, washed, and put on their new clothes."

"While the Earl and the two men were at your cottage," asked Lady Bellenden, "did you commit any oversight of which you have a recollection?"

"I remember addressing the Earl as '*My lord*,'" replied Widow Bushman, "although particularly enjoined by Miss Aylmer—Lady Holderness, I mean—to be careful on that head. His lordship was terribly angry——"

"That will do, my good woman," said the Marchioness. "You may retire—and be kind enough to send in the next witness."

"Is this child's play to last much longer, madam?" demanded Fernanda, no longer able to restrain her impatience beneath the air of contemptuous indifference which she had been assuming.

"Let her ladyship pursue her own course, Fernanda," exclaimed Earl Montgomery, in a bitter tone. "This is our ordeal: she will have to pass through *her's* presently."

Lady Bellenden started slightly and threw a furtive sidelong look of uneasiness upon the nobleman: but instantaneously recovering herself, she turned her eyes in the direction of the inner room. A third witness had just appeared in the form of a red-haired, scraggy, repulsive-looking young woman, with a very vixenish expression of countenance. She was totally unknown to both Montgomery and Fernanda; and though they did not choose to allow their features to show that they were at all interested in this new phase of the proceedings, they were nevertheless secretly filled with anxiety and curiosity in this respect.

"What is your name?" asked Lady Bellenden, who conducted the inquiry with all the precision and solemnity of an Old Bailey pleader.

"Mary Price, please your ladyship," was the answer; "and my father is one of the men whom his lordship, Earl Montgomery, hired to do a certain business down in the country. Joseph Warren is the other: and they're now both in Newgate."

"And what was the nature of the business you refer to?" continued the Marchioness.

"To put a handsome young gentleman out of the way, by burying him alive in the buttress of a bridge," returned Carrotty Poll.

"There was a lady present on the occasion, I believe?" said the Marchioness: "and the young gentleman ejaculated some name——"

"*Fernanda*," said Carrotty Poll.

Lady Holderness threw a fierce look upon the Big Beggarman's daughter and the Marchioness of Bellenden—then biting her scarlet lip almost till the blood came, she averted her head and resumed an aspect of consummate indifference.

"The murder of the young gentleman was not the only proceeding in which your father and his friend were engaged?" said Lady Bellenden, inquiringly.

"No, ma'am," returned Carrotty Poll. "There

was an entrance by night into a church—the opening of a vault—and a little affair with the parish register: but in this last business the Earl only was concerned."

"What proof have you of the opening of the vault?" asked Laura.

"This ring, taken off the finger of a dead body which was all exposed in its coffin," replied the red-haired witness: and she produced the jewel in question.

"It bears the crest of the Bellendens," observed the Marchioness. "The young woman," she continued in explanation, "called upon me this morning to know whether certain intelligence which she was able to give relative to some proceedings in the country would be useful to me, inasmuch as she had reason to believe the information bore materially upon the pending law-suit. She stipulated for a large reward, which I have given her;—and she has remained until this evening to repeat her testimony in your presence and proclaim all she knows. Have you any questions to ask her?"

Lord Montgomery made no reply, but kept his looks fixed upon the chandelier; and Lady Holderness tossed her head with a renewed air of indignant impatience.

"You may retire," said the Marchioness of Bellenden.

"But your ladyship had better command this witness and all the others," cried the Earl, as a thought suddenly struck him, "to remain quietly beneath this roof until the conclusion of the present proceedings: inasmuch as it will probably seem advisable to your ladyship, in the long run, to place the seal of strictest secrecy upon their lips—which no doubt can be done by means of your ladyship's gold," he added, bitterly. "In a word, I warn your ladyship, that if an exposure should take place, the honour and lives of Fernanda and myself will not be *alone* involved."

The looks of the Marchioness gradually became troubled as the Earl spoke: but conquering her emotions, she regained her usual calmness with a surprising promptitude, although Fernanda darted upon her a fiendish glance of mingled menace, hatred, and defiance.

"The witnesses will do nothing and say nothing *elsewhere*, unless in obedience to my orders," she observed: then, turning towards Carrotty Poll, who was still lingering in the room, she said, "Retire—and send in Mr. Roberts."

"The canting parson of Bellenden rectory," ejaculated the Earl, in a tone of contempt.

"I should perhaps inform you," said the Marchioness, taking no heed of the observation, "that the corpse of Lord Raymond Montgomery has been discovered in the buttress of Malden Bridge: but this intelligence has of course reached you, inasmuch as Mr. Rigden's clerk was present on the occasion, and evidence thereof was duly given before the Master in Chancery this forenoon."

While Lady Bellenden was yet speaking, Mr. Roberts entered the room and bowed coldly to the Earl and Fernanda, who took not the slightest notice of him. The testimony which the reverend gentleman gave was to the effect that the vault of the Bellenden family had been opened and examined in his presence, and that a particular coffin-plate had been unscrewed and consigned to his care. This he produced. Austin was then recalled; and he at once affirmed that the plate was the same he had procured at Birmingham in compliance with the instructions of Earl Montgomery. When he had once more retired into the adjacent room, the Marchioness bade Mr. Roberts conclude his evidence; and the reverend gentleman proceeded to state that there was every reason to justify the belief that one of the registers of the parish of Bellenden had been tampered with in respect to the date properly belonging to the death of the last Marquis of Bellenden's father. The principal ground of this belief was the fact that an entry for the year 1743 was made, by the presumed alteration, to stand in the midst of a number of entries for the year 1745,—an irregularity in the consecutive order of the entries which could only be explained by the suspicion that the original words describing the date in full had been erased and others substituted.

Having thus brought his evidence to a termination, the Rev. Mr. Roberts withdrew.

"The farce is now at an end, I presume?" said Lord Montgomery, the moment the door had closed behind the rector.

"Call it what your lordship will," returned the Marchioness of Bellenden, "I think you must admit that the affair has assumed a somewhat serious aspect, and that if all this additional evidence were produced before a criminal tribunal, the Lord Chancellor would have to base his final judgment upon the result. Lady Holderness," continued Laura, turning towards her cousin, and addressing her with a deeper solemnity, "it is not difficult to comprehend the part which you played in the tragedy of Malden Bridge. Lord Raymond loved you with an attachment that bordered upon adoration; and his blighted affections prompted him to seek a solitude congenial with his morbid state of mind. But his destruction was necessary to forward the aims of yourself and Earl Montgomery: you coveted the possessions which he claimed—and you were determined to constitute yourselves the heirs to that property, in the presumption that success would likewise attend upon the measures you devised to give a particular turn to the law-proceedings. Your plans were settled accordingly—and when the bravos were hired and in readiness to act, it became no difficult matter to induce Lord Raymond to meet *you*, Lady Holderness, at an early hour in the morning, and in the immediate vicinage of the farm. Indeed, I can readily suppose that a few days previously you had written him a letter containing the most earnest assurances that you repented of your past cruelty towards him—that you had at length learnt to love him—and that you were ready and willing to become his bride. But, with that subtlety which never fails your ladyship, you devised some excuse for investing the whole proceeding with the utmost mystery: you perhaps told him in your letter that his mother, the Dowager-Countess was averse to the match, and that the people at the farm had been secretly bribed to watch all his actions. Your readiness of invention was at no loss to account for the appearance of the mask upon your features; and a young, ardent, impassioned lover, entertaining the hope that he was about to repair to Bellenden village to make you his bride, was not very likely to be accessible to suspicious of evil."

"Enough of all this!" exclaimed Eugene Mont

gomery, starting from his chair. "Your ladyship is affecting to build a history upon *surmises of your own;* whereas all the details you have just explained with such accurate minuteness, are facts well known to you *from imprudent confessions on my part!*"

CHAPTER CCXXVIII.

THE SECOND ORDEAL.

On hearing these words, the Marchioness of Bellenden was seized with the sudden pallor of one on whose soul an accusation falls with the force of a blow abruptly dealt upon the head with a sledge-hammer: and though perhaps this accusation was not altogether unexpected on Laura's part, yet was her power of dissimulation inadequate to conceal the effect which it produced upon her.

"Your ladyship has compelled *us* to pass through an ordeal," continued the Earl, his eyes flashing with malignant hate and a savage triumph: "but I warned you ere now that *your* turn would come. The first ordeal, then, is passed: the second is on the point of commencing. *We* have been tortured beneath the harrows of your spite and rancour: *you* shall now undergo the same pleasant treatment at our hands."

"And inasmuch as you have summoned us hither that we may all three sit as judges and try our own case for ourselves," added Fernanda, her looks lowering ominously and her eyes shining with a sinister light,—"it is but fair and proper that *you* should listen as attentively to anything that we may have to bring forward, as *we* did to the evidence adduced on your side."

"I cannot object to such a course," said the Marchioness, who had by this time recovered her wonted self-possession and placid assurance. "But I presume that you do not deny the charges which have been so fully proven against you by my witnesses!"

"It is not worth while to deal in duplicity, Lady Bellenden," responded the Earl, resuming his seat; "and therefore I will at once plead guilty, on my own and Fernanda's part, to the various crimes alleged against us. Not that we glory in them: on the contrary, we may look back upon them with regret:—but they are irrevocable!"

"Regret!" echoed Lady Holderness, with a contemptuous curl of the lips: "I will not allow the term to be coupled with my name. In other respects, Eugene," she added, more mildly, "you may act as spokesman for us both."

"And I shall be as brief as possible," said the Earl: then, after a few moments' pause, he continued in the following manner, while keeping his eyes intently fixed upon the Marchioness of Bellenden:—"Your ladyship has adopted a course which is characterised by the most admirable cunning and astuteness. But, with all your powers of dissimulation, you could not avoid the tell-tale pallor which spread upon your cheek when I just now proclaimed a fact which was in itself an accusation against you. Ah! now you become nervous and uneasy once more;—and you are in suspense to learn how much *we* know of your past history—how far *we* can criminate you—and to what extent you have to fear us! Oh! it was a fine stroke of policy on your part to pay a visit to Warwickshire and cause certain investigations to be made as if you were altogether ignorant beforehand of what would be the results and to what discoveries those investigations would lead: whereas you well knew that the plate on the coffin-lid had been changed—that the register had been altered—and that Raymond Montgomery lay dead in the buttress of the bridge! Yes—all those circumstances you knew beforehand: because—infatuated, besotted fool that I was!—I revealed them to your ears when, in the mystic darkness of a voluptuous boudoir, my arms encircled your naked, palpitating form, and my head lay pillowed upon your bosom!"

"My lord—this insult—what means it?" exclaimed the Marchioness of Bellenden, springing to her feet, while her countenance glowed with that deep crimson hue which is excited either by shame or by indignation, and which as frequently betokens outraged innocence as conscious guilt.

"I mean, cousin Laura," said Earl Montgomery, with a semi-smile of sardonic triumph,—"that beneath the placid exterior which you are wont to wear, an Etna of frantic passions is concealed—and that the garb of widowhood which you have worn for twenty years, is nothing more nor less than the veil which a consummate hypocrisy has thrown over a career of unbridled licentiousness!"

"Your calumny is as odious as it is false, my lord!" exclaimed the Marchioness of Bellenden, her manner all of a sudden becoming so lofty and dignified and her looks so full of a proud assurance, that the Earl was staggered.

"Perhaps her ladyship would allow you to see her boudoir, Eugene," said Fernanda, in a tone of quiet sarcasm: "and although, from what you have told me, the scene of love, and infatuation, and folly, was involved in utter darkness,—yet may you have acquired a knowledge of the locality sufficiently distinct to be able to identify it."

"My indignation would prompt me to return a peremptory refusal to comply with any such suggestion," exclaimed the Marchioness, her manner acquiring a still loftier assurance; "but I feel so jealous of that reputation which is now assailed for the first time—at least within my hearing—that I shall unhesitatingly adopt any course which is calculated to refute the foul aspersion. Follow me."

And issuing from the room by the door that opened upon the landing, the Marchioness led the way along a passage, Fernanda and Eugene following close behind.

"This is my bed-chamber," said Laura, in a tone of proud confidence, as she stopped half way down the passage and threw open the door of an apartment.

"Your ladyship will excuse our impertinence if we enter it," said Lord Montgomery: but as he crossed the threshold, the rapid glance which he threw upon the draperies of the couch and the curtains of the windows showed him that they tallied not with the pieces which Lord Florimel had given him. "But this is not a boudoir?" he exclaimed, fixing his eyes intently upon the Marchioness.

"This is my boudoir," said the lady, at once throwing open another door, and leading the way to an inner room.

Again was Montgomery at fault. The draperies matched not the pieces: and moreover the arrange-

ments of the boudoir were totally different from those which he remembered so well, and according to which *the table stood between the sofa and the bed, and a large arm-chair was near the head of the bed itself.* But might not the curtains have been changed since the pieces were cut out of them? and might not the arrangements of the room have been altered? These thoughts suggested another: and approaching the window, he looked forth. The casement was upon the southern side of the Priory,—that quarter of the building which has already been described as the one that had *preserved its monastic appearance, with its massive walls, long and deeply set windows, low doors, and high pointed roofs*:—and the casement whence Montgomery now looked out, commanded a view of the garden. From the gate in the front boundary-wall two distinct gravel-walks branched off, one leading to the principal entrance of the mansion (which was on the northern side), and the other threading a shrubbery of evergreens and leading to the middle of the southern side.

"It was by this latter path that I was led blindfold on the night of my visit to the boudoir," thought Montgomery within himself, as he thus carefully examined the details of the locality. "Yes—there can be no doubt of it. My calculations do not err—and the door by which I was conducted into the building must be on this same side! Then the passage which we have now been threading assuredly leads to the staircase communicating with that door."

These thoughts passed rapidly through the mind of the Earl: and turning away from the window, he threw a quick and searching glance upon Lady Bellenden. That look, taking her as it were unawares, surprised upon her countenance the reflection of a feeling of uneasiness which was troubling her mind at the moment, as if she had penetrated into the motives of his survey from the window, and dreaded the surmises that he was sure to deduce therefrom.

"Well, my lord," she said, instantaneously recovering her self-possession, and resuming a look of offended dignity, "do you behold aught in the appearance of this chamber to warrant the belief that you have ever been here before?"

"Nothing," was the laconic reply.

The Marchioness accordingly led the way out of the boudoir through the bed-chamber into the passage, along which she began to retrace her steps towards the landing, when the Earl exclaimed, "With your permission, Lady Bellenden, we will proceed in *this* direction."

And he sped towards the farther extremity of the corridor, passing in his way the doors of two or three apartments.

"My lord, remember that this is not your own house!" cried the Marchioness, in a tone of mingled rage and terror, which she could no longer subdue. "This proceeding is most unwarrantable—most indelicate on your part! Do you hear me, my lord?"

"Ah! now I am upon the right track!" exclaimed the Earl, heedless of the lady's remonstrance. "Come hither, Fernanda—come hither!"

Lady Holderness was immediately by Eugene's side; and she found that he had halted at the top of a staircase looking down at a door which stood at the bottom.

"Yes—all my suspicions are confirmed—or rather my doubts are dispelled," he said, in a rapid tone of joyous excitement. "That is the door by which I entered the building on the memorable night of mystery and infatuation: this is the staircase so thickly carpetted—and the *real* boudoir of darkness, perfume, and love must be reached by one of these doors which we have just passed by!"

"My lord, I command you to leave the private department of my dwelling, and return to the drawing-room," exclaimed Lady Bellenden, as she came hurrying along the passage, her features now ashy pale, her eyes dilating with rage and terror, and her lips white and quivering. "Do you hear me, my lord?" she cried, as she clutched the Earl violently by the arm.

"Beautiful Laura," said the nobleman, with a mocking smile; "you were not thus ferocious when you conducted me blindfold along this passage to the boudoir of love and darkness!"

And disengaging himself from her convulsive grasp, he returned rapidly up the passage until he reached the first door on the right hand, which he endeavoured to open. It was locked: but without an instant's hesitation, he burst it open with his foot—and then a cry of exultation thrilled from his lips!

Lady Holderness, who was following close behind him, looked back and flung a glance of malignant triumph upon Lady Bellenden, as this unhappy woman leant against the wall of the passage for support—so overpowered was she by feelings of mingled shame, fury, and despair.

"Yes—this is the mysterious boudoir," cried Earl Montgomery, as he entered the small but luxuriously-furnished apartment, the shutters of which were now open: "here is the sofa on which I lay, embraced in the arms of my *then* unknown syren—here is the table whence she took the wine that subsequently deprived me of consciousness—and there is the bed, with the arm-chair near it!"

"'Tis false—all false!" murmured a hoarse voice: and as the Earl and Fernanda, both of whom had advanced into the chamber, turned their heads hastily round, they beheld the Marchioness tottering over the threshold.

"'Tis true—all true!" exclaimed the Earl. "And if your ladyship requires proofs——"

"Proofs?" echoed Laura, with a sudden start. "What proofs——"

"These!" replied Montgomery: and he flung down the pieces of drapery upon the table.

"Ah! then I am indeed betrayed!" moaned the Marchioness of Bellenden: and staggering to the sofa, she threw herself upon it—covering her face with her hands at the same time.

"Yes—there can be no longer any doubt," said Lord Montgomery, as he compared the pieces of drapery with the hangings themselves. "But if the last link in the chain of evidence be required, here it is," he added, as he pointed to a spot in the window-curtain and another in that of the couch, whence the pieces had been cut away.

At the same moment the clock on the roof of the Priory proclaimed the hour of seven in the evening: and as the bell hung in a turret on the southern side of the building, it was plainly heard inside the boudoir.

"Ah! there is still another link in the chain!"

ejaculated Montgomery: "I could swear to that chime, beyond all possibility of doubt!"

"But after all," said the Marchioness of Bellenden, suddenly withdrawing her hands and revealing a countenance that was ghastly pale and bore the imprint of many deeply concentrated passions,—"after all, what matters this discovery which you have made? Ere now, my lord, you set a good example and discarded the use of any further duplicity: I will do the same and confess that I *am* the heroine of your night's adventure here—that I am the wanton, dissolute woman I then avowed myself to be! Yes—we all spring from a delectable race in *that* respect," she added, with the laugh of bitter scorn which has poison in its mirth: "the Montgomerys and the Aylmers never were celebrated for extreme morality,—and the same fires that circulate in your blood, Eugene—and in yours, Fernanda—have also rendered every vein in my body the conduit for a lava-stream! But what more can be alleged against *me?* Laura may be reproached as a wanton who veils her dissoluteness beneath a widow's garb and an outward aspect of piety: but Eugene and Fernanda are murderers,—murderers upon evidence—murderers by their own confession!"

And the words came thick, hoarse, and fraught with a deep malignity, from the tongue of that lady who appeared to have been suddenly changed from an angel of benevolence and Christian amenity into a demoness of revenge, hatred, and spite.

"Ah! then you push me to extremities," exclaimed Lord Montgomery; "and you have only yourself to thank if the work of retaliation proceeds to the end! Laura," he added, fixing his eyes upon her countenance with an expression of deep and omnious meaning,—"the terms upon which we stand are more equal than you appear inclined to acknowledge—for if Fernanda and I caused the death of Raymond Montgomery, *you* did the same by your own husband!"

The Marchioness gave a sudden start, as if a galvanic rod had touched her;—and desperately though she struggled against the confusion, terror, and dismay which seized upon her, the attempt was of no avail. The influence of conscious guilt was more powerful than all the arts of dissimulation in which she was so well skilled;—and as a mirror darkens suddenly with the image that passes before it, so did her features reflect the tremendous accusation which had just been levelled against her.

Nor did she now endeavour to fall back upon her hypocrisy or her guile: but as her mind gradually recovered its self-possession after this last shock, she put on a degree of hardihood and a front of boldness, as if clothing herself in the armour most fitting to meet her adversaries upon the level which crime had established.

"We now know enough of each other to render it desirable that our differences should be settled amicably," she said, in a deep voice and with looks of profound significancy.

"You speak truly, fair cousin," returned Montgomery: "inasmuch as open warfare will only lead to the destruction of all three. But in case of an amicable settlement, can you insure silence on the part of all those witnesses whom you have gathered together at the Priory?"

"Beyond all doubt," was the answer immediately given by Lady Bellenden. "And on your side——"

"I can guarantee that the secrets of this mysterious boudoir shall remain unknown," rejoined Montgomery; "and that the world shall never suspect that the late Marquis of Bellenden died by poison."

"And you, Fernanda," said the Marchioness, now adopting a more familiar style,—"are you agreeable to an amicable settlement?"

"Eugene has truly observed that we cannot continue at war without entailing destruction upon all three," replied Lady Holderness. "As for myself—I have no further animosity against you, Laura: because if you made us pass through an ordeal, we have done the same by you—and therefore we are quits. Nay, more—if you would permit me to offer you a suggestion, I might propound a plan by which the settlement of the whole affair would be easy and natural."

"Speak!" ejaculated the Earl and the Marchioness together: then, as a suspicion relative to Fernanda's meaning flashed to the brain of each at the same moment, they could not help exchanging half-smiles and significant looks.

"Ah! you already anticipate me, I perceive," exclaimed Lady Holderness. "Well, I declare it is the best plan you can adopt! Of course you will allow me to take that portion of the Warwickshire property which I have all along claimed and to which the Master has pronounced me entitled; and the sooner the Marchioness of Bellenden becomes Lady Montgomery, the better."

"Laura, you once called me your handsome Eugene—here—in this very room," said the Earl, forgetting all his past rancour, not only on the ground of expediency, but likewise because the boudoir had stirred up glowing reminiscences and voluptuous longings in his mind. "Yes—in this very room, Laura, did you pay me the most flattering compliments——"

"And I told you likewise that I was not altogether deficient in personal charms," interrupted Lady Bellenden, her features now expanding into a soft wanton smile; "and if you consider that I did not make an idle, silly vaunt——"

"I always declared that my cousin Laura was supremely handsome!" exclaimed the Earl, taking her hand and pressing it in his own.

"Therefore, entertaining such a favourable opinion of each other's personal appearance," said Fernanda, "there is no reason why you should not forgive and forget and become one."

"With all my heart," exclaimed Lady Bellenden, reading a fervid assent in the Earl's looks

And then the strange compact was sealed by an embrace—and the lips of the woman who had poisoned her husband were pressed to those of the man who had murdered his brother;—and another aristocratic murderess was the witness of the scene!

CHAPTER CCXXIX.

A DEED OF VENGEANCE.

It was about eight o'clock in the morning, on the day after the many and varied incidents just related, that Melmoth was walking through Knights-

bridge in the direction of Hyde Park. He was apparelled in the same decent manner as when he encountered Tim Meagles in the Edgeware Road a couple of days previously: but his countenance was more deadly pale—and mingled with its expression of wild vacancy and latent ferocity, there was a look of stern unflinching resolution, as if his mind were made up to the accomplishment of desperate deeds.

Entering Hyde Park, he traversed the vast enclosure with slow but firm steps; and the clocks of the West End were striking nine as he reached the immediate vicinage of Park Lane. Then he paused and fixed his eyes with some degree of anxiety upon the nearest gate: through which in a few minutes his eldest son James made his appearance.

"I am glad you are come, my boy," said Melmoth: "for I had my misgivings——"

"And why so, father?" asked the lad, who, it will be remembered was little more than thirteen years of age, and who was as respectably dressed as his parent. "What is the matter with you?"

"I dont know—a presentiment of evil, I suppose," exclaimed the man, abruptly. "In fact, considering the ways to which we have taken, we are never safe for an hour together; and therefore I was apprehensive and low-spirited. Where are your brother and sister?"

"At the Kinchin-Ken in Grub Street, where we've been staying latterly," replied James. "There's plenty of other children of the same age at the Ken, you know: and the Kinchin-Grand is a good-natured fellow."

"Ah! he's already taught *you* the principles of his craft, Jem—eh?" said Melmoth: and he was shaken, despite of himself, with a strong convulsive shudder as he contemplated the son whom he had purposely handed over to the teaching of the consummate reprobate that accident had thrown in his way. "But let us change the topic," cried the man suddenly. "What news have you for me?"

"The pair of pistols you told me to buy are in my pocket," answered the youth.

"Come behind this tree," said Melmoth; "and give them to me. There! now I am delighted beyond measure!" he exclaimed, his countenance suddenly expressing a ferocious satisfaction and a glare of savage joy beaming in his eyes as he took the weapons from his son.

"What do you mean to do with them, father?—and where have you been all night?" inquired the lad, with a mingled apprehension and timidity.

"What I mean to do with the pistols, James, you may guess full easily if you will," said the man, a dark cloud settling upon his features. "Young as you are, I think you comprehend all that I have been endeavouring to instil into your mind since we met in the workhouse?—or is it possible that you have forgotten how deep are your father's wrongs, and how loudly your poor mother's death cries from the grave for vengeance?"

"No, no—I have forgotten nothing of all that," exclaimed the boy—trembling, or rather shivering as if under the influence of severe cold, although the weather was genial and warm.

"And yet you seem afraid, James?" said Melmoth, half angrily and half remorsefully.

"Afraid—no!" ejaculated the boy, instantly recovering his self-possession and his courage. "I am prepared to avenge your wrongs and my dear mother's death, father, in any way that you shall point out."

"And the surgeon's treatment of the poor baby, James?" observed Melmoth.

"Yes — and *that* also," responded the youth. "But our revenge in this respect will begin almost immediately: for 'tis past nine o'clock—and the nursery-maid will soon make her appearance with Thurston's child."

"You are sure that she walks regularly every morning in the park?" said Melmoth, inquiringly.

"Have I not watched her for some days past? and have I not reported to you that she invariably comes out to give the infant an airing between nine and ten in the morning?" exclaimed the boy.

"True!" observed Melmoth. "I hope she will not fail to-day. And now, James," he continued, in a tone that was serious even to solemnity, "you must understand well and thoroughly all I mean and purpose with regard to this child. On becoming possessed of it, you will bear it straight off to the Kinchin-Ken, where you will give it to the girls to nurse; and you will become as it were its guardian, or its parent. That is to say, James, you will rear it in the midst of vice, profligacy, and debauchery—you will bring it up to be a thief from its infancy—and on no account will you divulge the secret of its parentage until it is at least ten or twelve years old, should it live till then. Rewards will be offered for its recovery—advertisements will be inserted in the newspapers—placards will be posted — and all possible means will no doubt be adopted by Thurston to recover his child. But remember all I have told you—and may my most withering curse alight upon your head if you disobey me!"

"Do not talk in this style, father," exclaimed the youth, shuddering at Melmoth's awful words and the vehemence with which they were delivered. "I have already sworn to do your bidding in everything—and I shall not fail in this instance. Poor baby shall be avenged!" added the boy, with bitter emphasis.

"Now you speak as my son—and I am proud of you, James," said Melmoth. "That cruel, cold-blooded, heartless surgeon did not hesitate to keep the poor babe's body to anatomise, or to figure in a bottle upon a shelf in his surgery: he doubtless thought that the poor had no feelings, and that he might do as he chose with the infant of the beggar-woman who died upon the door-steps of a rich man's dwelling! But he shall be taught that there is retribution for even such an outrage as this!" exclaimed Melmoth, with an expression of countenance that was now absolutely infernal. "Do you hear me, boy?—and do you understand me?"

"I do," was the response, delivered with a kindred acerbity of feeling and rancorous vibration of voice. "The child of that surgeon shall be reared as a beggar — trained to become a thief——"

"Until the age of ten or twelve, according as he is more or less imbued with the inveteracy of evil principles," added Melmoth: "and then, James—*then* shall you reveal to him the astounding secret that he is the son of Thurston the eminent doctor of May Fair!"

"And, on learning that secret, he can go home to his parents if he chooses," said the boy, with a

malignant laugh. "But those pistols, father—are they——"

"For the Prince?" exclaimed Melmoth, finishing the lad's sentence for him. "Yes—one is for the Prince, the author of all our woes——"

"And the other?" said the boy, gazing intently up into his father's haggard, sallow countenance.

"The other?" echoed Melmoth, in a musing tone: then, suddenly fixing his eyes with a fearful expression upon his son, he said, "James, you will soon be compelled to act as a father towards your little brother and sister, who will have no other father to depend upon!"

"No, no—you must not leave us in this manner!" exclaimed the youth, in a burst of wild anguish, as he caught hold of his father's hand: and he would have fallen at his feet, had not the iron grasp of Melmoth suddenly clutched his wrists and held him up.

"Boy, you must show more nerve than this!" ejaculated the monster-man, in a stern tone and with a look of menacing reproach. "The time for child's-play is passed—the season for indulging in soft emotions is over! We have a terrible duty to perform—a frightful vengeance to wreak—and we must not shrink from the task! Tell me, James—do *you* shrink?"—and Melmoth grasped his son's arm with the force of an iron vice closing upon it.

"No, no—I do not shrink, father!" exclaimed the youth. "The remembrance of my poor mother—how she wept over me—how she died in my presence,—and the recollection of *your* manifold wrongs also,—Oh! all this inspires me with the courage of desperation and the spirit of a demon—and you shall behold no more weakness on my part!"

"Bravely spoken!" cried Melmoth, now pressing his son's hand fervidly between both his own. "Just now you asked me a question concerning the manner in which I spent the past night. This will show you;"—and he produced from his pocket a soda-water bottle filled with combustible materials.

"What is the use of it, father?" demanded the boy, as he took the bottle in his hand.

"Some night, James," returned Melmoth, "you will make it your business to pass by the great mansion on the door-step of which your poor mother sank down and died: and if you hear the sounds of music issuing forth and behold the elegant forms of the dancers throwing their shadows upon the window-curtains as they glide onward to the notes of the sounding harmony, you will hurl that missile through the casement into the midst of the joyous company. Oh! I can promise you that the gay laughter will in a moment be changed to horrifying shrieks and bitter lamentations! But you must not wait to mark the results: the instant that your vigorous arm has thrown the missile, your feet must bear you with all possible speed away. Do you understand me?"

"I do, father," answered the lad, with a sombre desperation of voice and manner which proved full plainly that he purposed to carry out to the very letter all the details of the atrocious instructions thus minutely given: then, having secured the murderous though rudely-contrived engine about his person, he said, "Society will be shaken to its very centre by all that we now propose to do. When, dear father, shall you put into execution your plan relative to the Prince?"

"His Royal Highness," answered Melmoth, in a tone expressive of bitter, burning hatred towards the object of his remark, "has gone to pass a few days at Windsor Castle. If our affair relative to Thurston's child comes off successfully this morning, I shall proceed to Windsor without delay; and in less than four-and-twenty hours, perhaps, all England will be startled by the tremendous tidings that the heir-apparent to the throne has ceased to encumber the earth and disgrace humanity with his presence. Such is my intention, James," added Melmoth: "and therefore it may be, my boy, that you and I shall never meet again in this life."

"Must it be so, father?" said the youth, in a low, deep, tremulous voice, while the quivering of his lips and the tears that started into his eyes showed how impossible it was for him to restrain his feelings altogether—earnestly though he struggled against them.

"It must be so, James," replied Melmoth. "You would not have me spare the Prince?"

"No—ten thousand times *no!*" exclaimed the lad, resolutely.

"And you would not have me swing to the accursed gallow's-tree?" continued Melmoth.

"Heaven forbid!" cried the boy, with accents and looks of horror.

"Then if I slay the Prince," rejoined Melmoth, "you will comprehend that there is only *one* course for me to adopt!"

"Give me your hand for the last time, father," said James, with deeper accents and darker looks: then, as he pressed it fervidly, he added, "I already regard you as one who no more belongs to this world."

For a few instants the father and son gazed upon each other in ineffable tenderness mingled with utter desperation: and then, as if afraid to trust themselves any longer to the melting influence of that mood, they loosened the grasp of their hands and averted their eyes with simultaneous abruptness.

At the same moment a young woman, bearing a child in her arms, entered the park. She was a nursery-maid in the service of Mr. and Mrs. Thurston: and the infant, which was now five months old, was not the offspring of that couple, as Melmoth and his son supposed—but was the fruit of the Princess Sophia's illicit amour with General Barth.

The child was sleeping in the arms of the nurse, who began to stroll in a leisurely way across the park, not taking any heed of the man and the youth who followed her at a short distance. Presently she turned out of the gravel-path, and proceeded to a spot where a bench stood in the agreeable shade of some trees; and there she seated herself. Melmoth and his son gazed around; and perceiving that the coast was clear enough for their purpose, they at once walked up to the place where the female was resting.

"Young woman," said Melmoth, in an abrupt tone and with determined manner, "no harm is intended to yourself: but you must give me that child."

The servant-maid was struck speechless with consternation at these words: but she instinctively pressed the slumbering child more closely to her bosom, as she looked up with mingled terror and amazement into the countenance of the monster-man.

less than that which appeared to be crushing the soul of the unfortunate Princess.

Painful—indescribably painful was their meeting now;—not only painful as an encounter between a brother and a sister may be rendered by circumstances of bitter adversity,—but with an enhanced poignancy because their heart's maddened feelings were mingled with a profound sense of shame.

"We now meet for the last time, Amelia," said the baronet, in a low and tremulous tone. "I thought that you would like to see me once more ere I quit this land for ever——"

"And to what part of the world, Richard, do you intend to repair?" asked the Princess, with downcast eyes and with a faint blush upon her cheeks.

"I know not—I have as yet resolved upon nothing," returned Sir Richard; "unless it be that I am decided to abandon my native country for ever. This is the only resolution which I have formed—and I am certain that you will approve of it."

"I do, I do," said the Princess, with impassioned earnestness: and now she raised her tearful eyes and fixed them with mingled tenderness and shame upon the baronet's countenance. "Yes—you do well to leave a country where you have experienced so much misery, Richard," she continued: "and whithersoever you proceed, may God Almighty's blessing attend upon you!"

"I know that you will often think of me, Amelia—and sometimes pray for me," returned the baronet, in a voice that was profoundly mournful: "and this thought will console me in my voluntary exile. But you, dear Amelia—oh! how can you bear up against the tremendous calamity that has overtaken us?"

"I shall sink beneath its weight, Richard," answered the royal lady: "for it is stronger than all the energies which I could possibly collect to counterbalance it. Day and night am I haunted by the most harrowing reflections: asleep or awake, the memory of the dread past pursues me, and points to a still more dreadful future. For, alas! I have no more hope of happiness in this world: my heart is breaking—all affections and feelings which constitute its vitality, are withered—and the brief remnant of my existence will be deluged in tears."

"Poor girl—too well can I appreciate the bitter, excruciating truth of all you say," returned the baronet, in a deeper despondency than before: "and I feel that it would be a mere mockery of your illimitable woe to proffer the words of consolation. Indeed, I am myself so broken in spirit—all my moral energies are so completely crushed—and I have so profound a sense of my heart's utter desolation, that I could not induce my lips to smile nor my tongue to articulate syllables of sympathy—no, not even to cheer a being so beloved as thou art!"

"Earth has no balm for souls so deeply wounded as ours, Richard," said the Princess, in a voice that was scarcely audible in its low plaintiveness: "and the world has no sympathy that can sooth the spirit which is writhing in the tortures of crucifixion! Oh! if it were not cumulating crime upon crime," she exclaimed, in a sudden paroxysm of despair, "I would seek refuge in the grave of a suicide."

"For heaven's sake talk not thus, Amelia!" exclaimed the baronet, alarmed and startled by her words and the impassioned energy of desperation with which they were uttered. "Come—give me your arm—and we will walk together for the last time. We must not say farewell until our souls are at least more tranquil and resigned."

"Pardon me, Richard, if I said aught to terrify you," observed the Princess, in a tone of plaintive entreaty, as she took the baronet's arm: "but you can understand how miserable—how very, very miserable I am!"—and her voice was lost in the sobs that almost choked her.

"You ere now used the word *crime*, Amelia," said Sir Richard Stamford; "and you were wrong! Yes—for *you* are not criminal, poor suffering girl!—*you* are not guilty, my well-beloved sister! In ignorance you loved me—in unconsciousness of the secret tie which bound us together, you gave me your heart. Nature's whisperings were not loud enough to carry an efficient warning to our souls; and therefore thou canst not blame thyself!"

"Would to God that I could reason in the same manner!" cried the Princess: then instantly checking the sudden impetuosity to which she had for a moment given way, and recovering her self-possession, she said, "There is a man near yonder trees, who appears to be watching us."

"No—it cannot be," returned the baronet. "Wherefore should he watch us?—and who could have set a spy upon our actions? But we will walk leisurely that way and assure ourselves upon the point."

"A vague and terrible presentiment of evil has just come over me," said the Princess: and Sir Richard felt her hand tremble as it rested lightly upon his arm.

"'Tis because your nerves are unstrung—your energies so cruelly shaken," he remarked, as he led her gently along: and yet the words which she had last uttered infused a vague and unknown terror into his own soul, as if he had caught the infection of that evil presentiment which the Princess already experienced.

"That man is assuredly watching us," she said, in a tone of increasing alarm. "Let us retrace our way."

"On the contrary," observed Sir Richard Stamford: "if he be really espying our movements, we must know what he is and who has employed him. I could not bear the thought of leaving England if it were to abandon you, Amelia, to any danger. Come—take courage—we are close by the knot of trees where he is stationed——"

"Ah! now he issues forth from his hiding-place," said the Princess; "and he seems to take no notice of us. I was foolish to give way to such idle terrors: but when the mind is labouring under the influence of a deep despondency, it converts the most trivial incidents into a cause of alarm."

Sir Richard Stamford made no reply to this observation, because he and the Princess were now within a few yards of the individual whose presence had filled them with such sinister apprehensions. The man, having emerged from behind the clump of trees, was apparently gazing with intentness in a direction exactly opposite to that whence Amelia and the baronet were thus advancing;—and the nearer they drew towards him, the more did they feel convinced that their alarms had been groundless.

But all in a moment, the man turned and faced them;—and ere the eye had time to wink, he de-

charged a pistol point-blank at Sir Richard Stamford.

A piercing shriek thrilled from the lips of Amelia—and a cry of mortal agony burst from those of the baronet as he started back and fell heavily upon the ground. The Princess threw herself upon her knees by his side: and at the same moment there was the report of a second pistol.

Wild with terror, and in the belief that this latter weapon was aimed at herself, she cast her frightened looks towards the assassin: but there was no cause for alarm on her own account—the man lay stone dead at a little distance!

* * * * * * *

* * * * * *

Ten minutes afterwards a park-keeper, who happened to pass that way, was horrified at the spectacle which met his view.

On the ground lay a man weltering in his blood, and with his head horribly shattered in such a manner that it was easy to perceive he had placed the muzzle of a pistol in his mouth and blown his brains out.

At a little distance a lady was stretched by the side of a gentleman the bosom of whose shirt was saturated with blood. He was quite dead, having received a mortal wound in the breast: but the lady, whom the park-keeper in dismay recognised to be the Princess Amelia, was only in a deep swoon.

Assistance was procured from the Castle, whither the unconscious lady was speedily removed;—and on regaining her senses, she awoke to the full horror of all the frightful recollections which poured into her maddening brain.

The particulars of so awful a tragedy could not be entirely hushed up: but at the inquest which was held upon the two bodies, the circumstance that the Princess Amelia was present when the murder and the suicide took place, was carefully suppressed. To the world the tale went forth that Sir Richard Stamford was assassinated in Windsor Park by some man who was altogether unknown, and who put a period to his own existence immediately after the perpetration of the mysterious deed. Upon the person of the assassin-suicide nothing was found to show who he was; and his features were so completely disfigured by the means he had adopted to ensure self-destruction, that no description could be given of his countenance so as to lead to his identification.

The remains of the baronet were interred in the parish church at Windsor; and the corpse of his murderer was buried by night in a neighbouring cross-road, without the performance of Christian rites.

To the reader the tragic occurrence is no doubt easy of solution. The assassin-suicide was James Melmoth;—and the strong resemblance which existed between Sir Richard Stamford and the Prince of Wales, had led the monster-man to mistake the unfortunate baronet for the heir-apparent to the British throne.

CHAPTER CCXXXI.

THE SNAKE WITH THE LOVELY SKIN.

It was on the same day and about the same hour when the tragedy took place in Windsor Park, that Lord and Lady Holderness were engaged in deep consultation together at their mansion in Cavendish Square.

They were seated together upon a sofa in the drawing-room; and Fernanda held a newspaper in her hand. Her countenance expressed mingled hardihood and triumph: but on the features of her husband might be traced a certain degree of uneasiness which he was evidently struggling to subdue. For the nobleman was afraid of his young, fiery, and impetuous wife: he dreaded her scorn and contempt even more than he feared her anger and her revilings;—and having suffered her to plunge him into the deepest abysm of turpitude, he clung to her as it were with a childish reliance for solace and reassurance amidst the terrors that haunted him night and day.

"Well, Walter, are you not satisfied with my reasoning?" she suddenly exclaimed, after a long pause: and as she spoke, she bent her violet eyes upon her husband with an expression of mingled annoyance and contemptuous pity. "Your countenance is still gloomy—there is uneasiness depicted upon your features ——"

"Do not upbraid me, Fernanda," interrupted Lord Holderness, in a voice of earnest entreaty. "I cannot help it if I still experience some little nervousness: but in a few days—when the storm has completely blown over—you shall find me as gay and happy again as ever I can possibly be in this world."

"Why do you persist in speaking of a storm?" demanded Fernanda, impatiently.

"Well, my dear—I meant to say that so soon as every incident which can possibly menace us, shall have passed, my apprehensions will cease altogether," answered the nobleman.

"I do not doubt it," said Fernanda, with a laconic contemptuousness. "In plain terms, you mean me to understand that when there is no danger you will fear none. This is the very acme of moral courage, Walter—and I congratulate you upon your bravery."

"Wherefore indulge in this cruel irony, Fernanda?" exclaimed Lord Holderness. "I deserve better treatment at your hands: for I plunged my soul in crime to save you from danger——"

"And to forward your own interests likewise," added the lady, in a sharp tone of rebuke.

"What object could I have had in aiding you to take the life of the old woman in Fore Street?" demanded the nobleman, with a scintillation of that spirit which Fernanda's domineering treatment had well nigh crushed altogether.

"Had you no interest in saving your wife from the chances of a fearful exposure and an ignominious death?" exclaimed Fernanda, her eyes lighting up and her cheeks flushing with indignation.

"Yes—to be sure," stammered Lord Holderness, as he gazed with mingled ardour and timidity upon that woman whose beauty was so dazzling and whose soul was so black, and who indeed might so well be likened to the most venomous of snakes with the loveliest of skins.

"And in putting Dudley to death," she continued, in a lower and softer tone, as she perceived that her looks had both overawed and fascinated her husband,—"did we not serve a double purpose, by

removing a man who was acquainted with secrets the revelation of which would have proved my destruction—and also by the accomplishment of a crime which circumstantial evidence fixed upon Arthur Eaton?"

"True, true!" ejaculated the nobleman. "But what if all that evidence should turn against ourselves to-morrow, when young Eaton stands in the dock at the Old Bailey?"

"I have already shown you the impossibility—or at least the improbability of such a catastrophe," said Fernanda. "This newspaper," she continued, pointing towards a particular column in the journal which she held in her hand, "contains the welcome tidings of Caroline Walters' death: and when that young woman breathed her last yesterday in Newgate, the only being whose malignity or whose revelations we had cause to fear, ceased to exist."

"But suppose that Caroline and Arthur Eaton have encountered each other in Newgate?" said Lord Holderness. "Depend upon it, Arthur has his suspicions relative to yourself, if not with regard to me: and if Miss Walters has told him all she knew or suspected——"

"It is by no means probable that they met," interrupted Fernanda, an expression of uneasiness now glittering for a moment in her eyes. "At all events," she continued, with the resolution of one who was determined not to meet apprehensions half way, but rather to discourage the slightest concession to the influence of such fears,—"at all events, if such an encounter had taken place in prison between Arthur Eaton and Caroline Walters, the newspaper would have most likely made some mention of the circumstance: or else," she added, in a lower tone, and with a sudden darkening of the looks, "we should have been already arrested!"

"And we shall not be safe until *after* the trial of young Eaton," said Lord Holderness, now shuddering visibly: for that transitory terror on his wife's part was not lost upon him—and he failed not to catch its infection. "I wish to heaven we were two days older!"

"In two days," observed Lady Holderness, with a solemnity of tone and manner not very usual with her, "we shall be either safe and happy—or else dead!"

"Dead!" echoed her husband, with a spasmodic start; "what mean you, Fernanda?"

"I mean," she responded, "that if anything should transpire to menace our safety and threaten an exposure, we will anticipate our doom——"

"By suicide?" murmured her husband, with the deep voice and the shuddering look of concentrated horror.

"To be sure!" ejaculated Fernanda. "Should you shrink from such a course?—or do you prefer death upon the scaffold?"

"My God! what alternatives!" cried the wretched nobleman, trembling from head to foot, and his naturally sallow countenance becoming absolutely ghastly. "But you do not think that there is any danger, Fernanda?" he said, with all the grovelling meanness of a coward disposition that seeks to imbibe the inspiration of confidence and courage from the assurances of a bolder and more daring spirit:—"you have told me that there is nothing to fear—and yet you yourself are not altogether free from alarm? Oh! speak candidly—frankly,—and say whether you think Arthur Eaton will be able to rebut the charge of a double murder and fix the appalling accusation upon us?"

"I have already assured you of my belief in our safety," responded Fernanda: "but I must candidly confess, since you yourself have offered the suggestion, that much—if not everything—depends upon whether Caroline Walters had any communication with Arthur Eaton before her death. The affair of the knife is the most damnatory point in the evidence against Arthur; and if the case remains just as it was when he was committed for trial, his condemnation is certain."

"But may he not offer some explanatory suggestions relative to the incident of the knife?" asked Lord Holderness, whose conscience rendered his imagination poignantly active in conjuring up fresh sources of terror. "Or suppose, for instance, that the cutler of whom I purchased that knife should happen to come forward ——"

"How can he, unless sought after?" exclaimed Fernanda. "Besides, did you not choose a knife which happened to have no maker's name upon either blade?"

"True," observed Lord Holderness. "There is however another point which troubles me in connexion with the affair of the knife."

"What is it?" demanded Fernanda, abruptly.

"I mean," responded her husband,—"that is, I fear that Arthur Eaton will be enabled to give a feasible explanation relative to the incident. During the period of his incarceration he has had ample leisure to collect his ideas and concentrate all his reminiscences; and he will not fail to recollect that visit which you and I paid him in Hanover Square immediately after our marriage."

"He cannot well have forgotten it," observed Lady Holderness.

"No—and therefore he will call to mind the fact that while you remained alone with him for a short space," continued the nobleman, "I found a pretext for retiring to the library;—and it cannot possibly fail to strike him how easy it was for me to slip up to his own bed-chamber and conceal in the drawer that blade which I had previously and purposely broken off from the knife. Then, if this proceeding on my part be suspected, it will require no ghost to suggest that the same hand which dropped the blade into the drawer also scratched the initials '*W. D.*' upon the handle of the weapon——"

"Really, you are allowing your terrors to travel too fast and much too far, Walter," exclaimed Lady Holderness, rising from her seat. "You are pusillanimous to a degree——"

At this moment a domestic entered the apartment to announce that "a man who was waiting in the hall, desired to speak immediately to Lord and Lady Holderness."

"Show him up into this room," said Fernanda, without losing a tittle of her self-possession or even changing colour.

The domestic withdrew;—and Lady Holderness, turning towards her husband, saw that he was white as a sheet and trembling from head to foot.

"Go into that room, Walter," she said, in an imperious tone, as if speaking to a child: and as she pushed him into an adjoining apartment, with which there was a communication by means of folding-doors, she observed, "If any danger be menacing us, we shall know how to act: but if a mere suspicion be alone existing against us, your looks would confirm it."

Then, having shut the door upon her husband, who was already half dead with terror, she hastened to the window and glanced into the Square. An ill-looking man was stationed opposite the house——another was loitering at a short distance—and a third was leaning against a lamp-post a little farther off still.

Fernanda turned away from the window with a fearful tightening of the heart-strings and with a hideous pang shooting through her brain: for she felt convinced that her own hopes of security and triumph were destroyed and that her husband's presentient terrors were but too well founded. It was however with a strong and almost incredible effort that this woman, so daring in crime and so courageous in the presence of danger, recovered her self-possession as she advanced to meet the man whom the domestic was now ushering into the apartment.

"What is your business?" she asked, motioning the servant to withdraw: and her voice trembled not—neither did her limbs, although an ice-chill fastened upon her heart's core as she met the sinister gaze of the visitor whose very look denoted the officer of justice.

"I want to speak to your ladyship on a very particular matter," said the man: "but Lord Holderness must be present—if he happens to be at home——"

"Did not the servant tell you that his lordship was within?" inquired Fernanda.

"Why, yes, my lady—the hall-porter said so," returned Crawley, the Bow Street Officer—for he indeed it was: but the lady's extraordinary self-possession, so inconsistent with conscious guilt and so far beyond the usual power of hypocritical assumption, perfectly staggered the man despite of all his experience.

"And what is the nature of the business that has brought you hither?" demanded Lady Holderness, with a dignified courtesy that was in admirable keeping with her rank.

"To tell your ladyship the truth," replied Crawley, "it's not a very pleasant business any way: but I'd rather explain it in the presence of his lordship, whom I want to see as well as yourself."

"Sit down for a moment," said Fernanda, pointing to a chair: "and I will fetch Lord Holderness."

Then, without any visible excitement, she passed into the back drawing-room, closing the leaf of the folding-doors behind her.

Her husband, who had listened at those doors to the brief dialogue which took place between Fernanda and the constable, seemed now to be armed with the courage of desperation;—and the intrepid woman was both amazed and rejoiced,—if joy she could possibly experience under such circumstances,—at this change which had been wrought in him at the supreme moment.

"All is lost!" she said, in a low whisper, as she took his hand and pressed it in token of satisfaction at his altered demeanour.

"I know it, Fernanda," responded Lord Holderness, with firm but hollow accents. "I listened——"

"And you heard enough to convince you that this man is a constable?" added the lady. "I can tell you more—and that is, there are other officers in the Square. Our arrest has been resolved upon!"

"Let us die, Fernanda—let us die!" said the nobleman, clasping his hands in a sudden access of despairing horror. "Oh! my poor children—my orphan, neglected, ill-used daughters——"

"Yield not yourself up to vain lamentations, Walter," interrupted his wife, in a stern tone. "Every instant is precious——"

"Yes, yes!" murmured Lord Holderness: "we must die now to avoid a more dreadful fate a few weeks later! But the means—the means?"

"Here!" said Fernanda, producing *two* small phials from her bosom. "I have all along been prepared for the worst—and in providing for myself I was not selfish enough to forget you!"

"One last embrace, Fernanda—one last kiss!" said the nobleman in a voice that was scarcely audible, as he took the phial which she proffered him. "Oh! if you had never tempted me to evil, how happy we might be together: for now that I am about to surrender you to the cold embraces of death, you appear more lovely in my eyes than ever you were before—lovely though you have always seemed!"

And snatching to his breast that snake with the charming skin, he covered her countenance with kisses.

But disengaging herself from his arms, she said, while the fever of a strong excitement burnt in her eyes and glowed upon her cheeks, "Now, Walter—now! Let us court death while we have the courage!"—and she seated herself upon a sofa, while her husband took his place by her side.

"We will drink together, Fernanda," whispered Lord Holderness, whom his wife's dauntless example armed with an intrepidity equal to the fearful occasion.

And with their eyes fixed upon each other, they placed the phials to their lips.

In the adjacent room Mr. Crawley was anxiously awaiting the return of Lady Holderness in company with her husband, both of whom he was prepared to take into custody,—when he was suddenly startled by hearing some object fall heavily in the adjoining apartment.

It fell like a human being—with the dull, dead sound which no other thing on earth sends forth when falling;—and a suspicion that all was not right flashed through the brain of the constable.

Springing from his seat, he rushed to the folding-doors—burst them open—and precipitated himself into the apartment.

There what a spectacle met his eyes! Upon the sofa lay Fernanda, her head hanging over the side, and her form without the least quivering of vitality left;—and, close by, her husband was stretched on the carpet, also stone dead!

The empty phials bore testimony to the fact that some potent poison had served as the means of self-destruction;—and such indeed was the last use that the guilty Fernanda made of the *Heir's Friend*.

CONCLUSION.

On the following day the Honourable Arthur Eaton was placed upon his trial at the Old Bailey: but the proceedings now assumed a complexion altogether different from that which they had worn when under investigation by the magistrate at Bow Street. The counsel for the prisoner entered into a full and complete detail of his client's former connexion with Fernanda,—how he had seduced her, and how her vengeance had adopted such a dark and subtle course in the hope of sending him slowly, and silently, but surely to the tomb,—how he had discovered the receipts of the poison and the antidote at the midwife's house, and how Mr. Bradford the eminent chemist had ana-

lysed them — how he had detected and pardoned William Dudley,—and how Fernanda, after she became Lady Holderness, had called upon him at his father's house in Hanover Square and proposed utter oblivion of the past, with friendship for the future. The learned counsel for the prisoner then touched upon the acquaintance which the late Caroline Walters had formed with Fernanda, at the midwife's dwelling in Fore Street; and this matter he especially introduced in order to show that Fernanda had been an accomplice in the murder of her own child. He next proceeded to explain the strong inducements which Fernanda naturally had to make away with William Dudley and Mrs. Lindley;—and he concluded by observing that the suicide of Lord and Lady Holderness was a sufficient proof of their joint guilt in respect to the double murder with which the Honourable Arthur Eaton had been hitherto charged. The learned counsel then called Mr. Bradford, who deposed to the analysis of the poison and the antidote; and also a cutler, who identified the knife with the broken blade as one which he had sold to a gentleman whom he described, and who from that description was evidently the late Lord Holderness. The counsel for the prosecution declined to carry the case any further; and the Honourable Arthur Eaton was at once acquitted.

We should here observe that no mention was made of the conversation between Carrotty Poll, the Big Beggarman, and the Magsman, which Caroline Walters had overheard in Newgate, and which she had communicated to Arthur Eaton: for not only were the matters involved in that discourse altogether foreign to the case of the young gentleman himself, but he was likewise unwilling to have anything adduced that might blacken the memory of Fernanda more deeply than it was already stained.

When Arthur's trial was concluded, the Magsman and the Big Beggarman were placed in the dock, charged with murder and piracy. Watkins and Bradley, who served with the prisoners on board the *Royal George*, were admitted as King's evidence; and to their testimony was superadded that of Paul Winnington, the surviving sailor of the *Fire-Fly*. The charges were fully made out by these witnesses; and the two villains were sentenced to be hanged at Execution Dock. But the culprits made light of the judgment thus recorded against them: for they felt assured that through the written undertaking of the Prince of Wales, which Carrotty Poll had in her possession, their lives would be spared.

The reader will perhaps recollect that Caroline Walters had penned a hasty note to Mr. Rigden, acquainting him with the fact that the boy Alfred, who had stolen the Florimel papers, was employed by a woman named Price, who kept a low public-house in Horslydown. Now the attorney was not a man to suffer any injury which he received to go unavenged; and he was particularly inveterate against the double-faced youth who had so completely succeeded in outwitting him. Accordingly, after instituting certain inquiries relative to the woman Price and her public-house, he went to Bow Street and laid a complaint to the effect that the boy Alfred, being incited by certain persons who dwelt at or infested the Beggar's Staff in Horslydown, had plundered him of a considerable sum of money. This allegation was of course untrue: but Mr. Rigden did not think it quite prudent to say anything about a packet of deeds which he himself had originally obtained in so sinister a manner. Upon the representation which he made, warrants were issued against the boy Alfred and Mary Price; and Mr. Crawley was entrusted with the execution of them. Accordingly, in the evening of the day on which the Magsman and the Big Beggarman were tried at the Old Bailey, the Bow Street runners made an incursion into Horslydown, and took the Beggar's Staff by storm. Carrotty Poll and the boy Alfred were arrested; and a number of persons who had long been "wanted" by the authorities for various matters, were found in the house at the time and taken into custody. These were the Gallows' Widow, Briggs, Miles the Buxgloak, Dick the Tramper, and the Kinchin-Grand. The premises were moreover searched from bottom to top; and considerable quantities of stolen property were discovered. But amongst the various articles which fell into Mr. Crawley's hands upon this occasion, was the document signed by the Prince of Wales and guaranteeing their lives to Joseph Warren and Stephen Price!

Nothing could exceed the rage and despair of the Gallows' Widow and Carrotty Poll at this misadventure: but their tears and their threats were alike unavailing;—and the whole posse of prisoners who were thus arrested at the Beggar's Staff were conveyed to prison.

That very same evening the document was restored to the Prince of Wales;—and a few weeks afterwards Mr. Crawley was appointed governor of a gaol in some distant part of the country, with a salary of three hundred pounds a-year..

But here we must observe that on the same evening when the incursion was made by the constables into Horslydown, a frightful occurrence took place in Grafton Street. A nobleman who lived next door to Earl Montgomery gave a grand entertainment: and as Eugene was returning home from a visit which he had been paying to Lady Bellenden at the Priory, he observed a respectably-dressed youth lurking about exactly opposite the mansion whence emanated the soft sounds of music and the beams of roseate light. The Earl thought nothing of it at the moment—especially as his mind was filled with the suicide of his cousin Fernanda and her husband. But happening to look forth from his parlour-window twenty minutes or half-an-hour afterwards, he still saw the same boy loitering in front of his noble neighbour's mansion; and, now entertaining a suspicion that the youth had some evil intent, he issued forth and demanded why he was lurking in that vicinage. The boy was seized with confusion and endeavoured to conceal in his jacket-pocket some object which he had just before been holding in his hand. Montgomery caught him by the arm and insisted on knowing what it was that he thus endeavoured to hide: but the boy struggled to release himself—and in the brief scuffle the object fell from about his person. There was a smash of glass upon the pavement, instantaneously followed by a terrific explosion which shattered the windows of the adjacent houses. Forth ran the affrighted guests from the mansion where the entertainment was taking place,—forth also ran the servants from Lord Montgomery's abode. And awful was the sight that met their view! The Earl and the boy were stretched lifeless upon the pavement—their countenances disfigured, their bodies bleeding from innumerable wounds. They were conveyed indoors and medical assistance was promptly obtained: but all human succour was unavailing — and thus perished Earl Montgomery, together with the son of the monster-man!

Joseph Warren and Stephen Price found themselves, within a few hours after their condemnation, deprived of all hope and all resource. The document on which they had relied, was no longer at their disposal: Fernanda and Earl Montgomery, whose intervention in their behalf they might have ensured by means of threats, were no more.

The two villains accordingly resigned themselves to their fate, and suffered the last penalty of the law at Execution Dock.

The posse of prisoners whom Crawley arrested at the Beggar's Staff, were respectively condemned to various periods of incarceration, according to the offences which they had committed; and Mr. Rigden, having *substantiated by oath* the charge which he had made against Alfred, had the satisfaction of getting the boy sentenced to a couple of years' imprisonment along with the rest. As for Mr. Rigden himself, he

flourished to the end of his days, as most roguish attorneys are certain to do.

The Kinchin-Ken was not broken up because the Grand was removed for a time from the sphere of his dominion: but Shickster Sal and Old Bloak continued to profit by the depredations and thefts committed by the juvenile tribe, amongst whom Melmoth's two surviving children in time attained to a considerable degree of celebrity. The baby stolen from Thurston's nurse was entrusted to the special care of Shickster Sal, who failed not to rear the unfortunate being in all the demoralization of the Kinchin-Ken: and thus was the illicit offspring of Royalty trained from its very infancy amongst beggars, thieves, and prostitutes!

The reader will remember that, in pursuance of a diabolically concerted plan between the Prince of Wales and Mr. Page, certain noble French refugees—namely, the Marquises of St. Croix and Bellois, and the Duke of Villebelle—were induced to repair to France in the hope of finding the Vendeans ready to unfold the banner of a royalist insurrection. But the Prince caused a private intimation of the circumstance to be given to the French government; and the betrayed refugees, on setting foot in La Vendée, were arrested, tried, and put to death! By this infernal treachery, the heir-apparent to the British throne evaded the repayment of the money which he had borrowed from the Marquis de Saint Croix—retained possession of the funds deposited in his hands by the Duke de Villebelle—and avenged himself upon the Marquis de Bellois in respect to this nobleman's amour with Mrs. Fitzherbert.

The unfortunate Villebelle had confided, through the agency of Mr. Page, no less than forty thousand pounds to the keeping of the Prince. This was precisely the sum which his Royal Highness had to pay Mr. Meagles: namely, twenty thousand in settlement of the guarantee given at Stamford Manor—and a similar amount in liquidation of the I. O. U. which Lord Desborough had presented to Tim on the same occasion. Thus enriched, our sporting friend was enabled to cut a fine figure at the West End; and in due course it was announced in the newspapers that Mr. Meagles had laid claim to the dormant Marquisate of Edgemore. The matter was brought before the House of Lords: no opposition was offered—and, behold! the dashing, gay, and unprincipled Tim became elevated to the peerage. He soon afterwards married Lady Lade; and the remainder of their days were passed happily enough.

The services which Mr. Page rendered the Prince of Wales in divers and sundry ways, were rewarded with an income of two hundred a-year, but the payment of which was made conditional on the ex-bagman's betaking himself to some town at least a hundred miles distant from the metropolis. This was no great hardship to Mr. Page: and he accordingly fixed his habitation at Bath, where he managed to thrust himself and his wife into what is called "tolerably good society."

Harriet, the lady's-maid, was acquitted of the charge of complicity in the murder of Grumley: but the constitution of the poor creature had suffered so severe a shock, that she died soon after her release from Newgate.

The Marchioness of Bellenden lived to a good old age, retaining her widow's weeds and pursuing her covert debaucheries unto the end. In this voluptuous career she continued to be assisted by her confidante Margaret, and also by two men-servants who had long been in the secret of her dissolute life and who indeed were her paramours as well as her domestics. These individuals—Richard and Mason—have already been alluded to in the course of our narrative: they were both tall, handsome men—and their discretion, being liberally rewarded, helped to throw the veil of hypocrisy over the debaucheries of their mistress.

The Dowager-Countess Montgomery did not long survive the death of her elder son: she perished of a broken heart—and a marble monument in a church at the West End ascribes to her ladyship a thousand virtues, not one of which she ever possessed.

The Countess of Desborough survived her husband, the ill-fated Earl, about seven years, which period she passed in a secluded manner at her town-residence in Berkeley Square. Her beauty faded rapidly—she wasted and pined away, beneath the influence of a crushing remorse;—and at the time of her death, rumour declared "that her ladyship's last hours were rendered terrible and agonising to a degree by the phantoms which her disordered imagination conjured up." It was likewise stated "that amongst the dreadful delusions which haunted her, was the belief that she had committed a murder; and that she died with the name of *Ramsey* upon her lips!" Oh! little deemed they who witnessed Eleanor's death-bed, how sternly real were the harrowing images which floated in her mind, but which were thus supposed to be the hallucinations of a disordered fancy!

The suicide of Lord Holderness and the dark tales attached thereto, were a terrible blow for poor Pauline, and likewise for Octavia, from whom it was impossible to keep the fatal event concealed. But thanks to the generous care of Florimel and Arthur Eaton, the sad tidings were broken as delicately as possible to Pauline in the first instance, and by this amiable young lady to her afflicted sister afterwards. We shall not pause to describe their grief: suffice it to say that it would have been overwhelming, were it not for the unwearied attentions and assiduities of Gabriel and Arthur.

Octavia became the mother of a female child—the fruit of her amour with the Prince of Wales: and by degrees, as she recovered from her confinement, her reason returned altogether and her mind regained its pristine strength, although its buoyant freshness had fled for ever. In due time she listened to the honourable proposals which the Honourable Arthur Eaton made to her: for, although the sad story of her first love and her shame was *now* known to him, he generously renewed that offer which had formerly been rejected. Accordingly, about eighteen months after the death of her father Lord Holderness, Octavia Clarendon became the wife of the Honourable Arthur Eaton. and on the same day Pauline bestowed her hand upon Lord Florimel.

About the same time Rose Foster accompanied George Woodfall to the altar: and the Marchioness of Bellenden, who never omitted any opportunity of sustaining her reputation for benevolence as well as piety, presented the bride with a dowry of five thousand pounds upon the wedding day. The young artist, having some time previously thrown off the yoke of Mr. Shrubsole the picture-dealer, was already rising in reputation at the period of his marriage; and in a few years he achieved the celebrity of one of the greatest painters of the age.

We have now brought the *First Series* of the MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON to a conclusion. But though the curtain has fallen upon the career of most of the characters who have been figuring upon the stage of our narrative, there are still some the thread of whose history it is our purpose to take up and entertwine with the incidents of another tale. The catalogue of the amours of the voluptuary George is not exhausted: while the wrongs, the persecutions, and the trials of his hapless wife, Caroline of Brunswick, remain to be delineated. The materials which we possess for our forthcoming labours will afford scope for even a deeper and more absorbing interest than that which has characterised any previous work of our's: and confident in our ability to realise this promise to its fullest extent, we now invite the attention of our readers to the *Second Series* of the MYSTERIES OF THE COURT OF LONDON.

END OF THE FIRST SERIES.

MAR 27 1933